

Halo: Genetics

by Wandering Zephyr

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Summary: Wisdom is a fickle thing, Quick to turn, and the "truth" can sting. Of its quirks, beware ye all, Or no longer will you be standing tall. It watches the clouds, and sends out a call, but agendas are manyâ€| and so, do perfect plans fallâ€|

1. Phase 1: Awakenings

****Halo: Genetics****

****Phase 1.0: Authors Notes****

This idea has been lurking my head around for a while, so I thought I'd finally try getting it onto paper. Simply put, it's my take on what happens after Halo 3. That said, I won't be trying to replace the upcoming Halo 4, so I'll make every effort to end in such a way that it could fit in the gap between.

Yes, another Halo 3 follow up. This one should be a little different though. At least once it gets going anyway.

I use the UK version of English though, so some minor spelling differences to the USA version of the language may be present.

And finally, for now at least, sorry for the rather odd sense of humour. I'll try to keep it under control.

****Glossary:****

I'll be regularly referring to the races of the Covenant by their true names. For those not up to date with these, they are as follows:

Grunt: Unggoy

Jackal: Kig-Yar

Elite: Sangheili

Hunter: Lekgolo

Brute: Jiralhanae

Drone: Yanme'e

Prophet: San-Shyuum

Engineer: Huragok

Disclaimer: The plot is mine. Everything else, at least for now, characters, technology, universe, etc. is the property of 343Industries. Well, bar one character at this stageâ€|

****Phase 1.1: Awakenings****

Space is rarely seen as empty. The awareness has a habit of skipping across the void, of coming to rest â€" seemingly at random, on some point of note. What this point is may not be immediately apparent. But it is always there.

Take now for example. Looking around, there doesn't seem to be anything worth noting. Black emptiness, distant pinpricks of light that we like to call "stars". Apart from that, and the odd atom invisible to the average naked eye, nothing.

But then the mind starts to notice discrepancies. Little things, seeking to alert you to the fact that, once again, the mind's eye has been anything but random. In this case, a large circular area where the stars areâ€| strangely absent.

And then the sun emerges from its edge, showing that said void is in fact, a planet. A circular patchwork of green and grey, laced with streaks of blue. A planet that by all rules of probability shouldn't exist. It orbits alone, around a star that likewise sits in the middle of nowhere, many light-years from the nearest galaxy, swirling overhead. A rogue system shouldn't even have formed, after all, where did the rest of the material go? Unless of course, the laws of probability allowed for exactly the right amount to form everything we see in front of us, and no more.

Suddenly, a weak glimmer of reflected starlight. A ship, incomplete, twisted and distorted. It gradually tumbles inward, heading for an impossible orbit that can only mean a fast and flaming descent to destruction.

And there! Another ship approaches the world, this one in considerably better condition. But nonetheless, the Spirit of Fire has been through troubles just as dire as the all but derelict Forward unto Dawn. It doesn't show so much from here, but the interior is another story altogether. The ship's cryotubes are mostly empty, the vehicle storage bays all but clear of man and machine. And the most critical portion of the ship, the Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine, is missing altogether. And that, is why the colony ship turned warship has been coasting under its regular drives, trying to cross the vast distances back to Earth. To say it would be a long haul, is vastly understating the sheer magnitude of the

endeavour.

But at least the ship is reasonably intact, unlike the tormented
_Forward __unto __Dawn_...

It has been a long time since this world saw visitors. And now two ships show up at once. When the ruling intelligence below finally takes notice, it's probably going to be more than a little surprised.

So what will it think when the _others_ arrive?

###

UNSC Stalwart class Frigate, Forward unto Dawn

The ship was wrecked, no doubt about it. Missing its front half, heavy damage to the remainder, it shouldn't even have been in space. Yet, things had improved since the last time anyone living had looked in. In the cryobay, much of the debris had been cleared away. There was an atmosphere, odd considering the lack of hull integrity, or of the hull full stop. Something had been making repairs.

And as we all know, one of the ship's notorious inhabitants had spent the journey in cryosleep, and the other notable persona on board wasn't exactly equipped for manual labour. Which made the Master Chief all the more confused as he started to come round.

"Chief? Wake up."

As if he wasn't trying to already. His skin itched like a swarm of hornets had taken up residence in his armour, which is the typical response of the skin when any form of garment is worn during cryosleep. Wearing a full suit of MJOLNIR armour suddenly didn't seem like such a good idea. He gagged, bringing up a mouthful of bronchial surfactant, then swallowed it straight back down. He didn't need to be told about its nutrient qualities _yet__again_.

Gradually, his eyes adjusted to the light. They wandered about, noting the discrepancies compared to when he'd gone into cryosleep. And then they focused on the figure in front of him. The slender blue woman of light standing on the holotank.

"Cortana?"

"Chief. You may want to get moving, we've got a problem."

"Brutes?"

"No, no, nothing like that."

The Chief relaxed.

"Just the simple matter of a planet hitting us in the next couple of hours."

And that was it for the relaxing.

"What?" he said, pulling himself out of the cryotube in one smooth

motion.

"A planet. Right in our path. I thought that might be something you'd like to be woken for. Are you feeling alright?"

"Yes."

"Is that it? No "thank you" or some oth-"

The Chief held up his hand for silence. As Cortana watched, he re-orientated himself and pushed off the tube, heading for the door.

"Chief-"

He simply made the "kill noise" gesture as he took up position by the door. The tension in the room rose sharply.

And the door slid open...

###

UNSC Phoenix class colony ship (modified) Spirit of Fire

Onboard the _Spirit __of __Fire_, a very similar event was taking place.

"Captain, wake up. Something has happened."

DÃ©jÃ vu was the first thought going through Captain James Gregory Cutter's mind. His eyes focussed on the holotank in front of him. Or more precisely on the hologram of the AI standing on the tank.

"Hmm? Didn't you say that last time Serina?" he said, getting out of the cryotube.

"And how else would you like me to wake you up? Something to do with coffee?"

As usual, the young looking AI always managed to put some sarcastic remark into everything she said. But Cutter wasn't having any of it this time.

"So, what is it this time? Another unexpected course change?"

The first time he'd heard her "something has happened" line, it had resulted in a change in heading, _away_ from Earth. The ships sensors had picked up an odd reading from a location several light years away, _outside_ the galaxy. It had had strangely similar characteristics to the shield world that the _Spirit_ had all so recently left. And considering that said world had been home to a fleet of warships, all of which equipped with FTL drives, maybe the same could be said for wherever the reading was coming from.

Cutter had made his decision. The source of the anonymous readings was a _lot_ closer than Earth. And so, he had ordered Serina to change course, the maintenance crew to go into cryosleep, emerging every six months to check on things, and for Serina to switch to a lower level running mode that would hopefully extend her lifetime.

"No sir. Perhaps you should take a look at this though."

An image appeared next to her on the holotank, her own figure shrinking slightly to give it room. She'd want payment for that later.

The display showed the Spirit, and a planet.

"You'll be pleased to know that there was something waiting for us. Just what that something is, however, could be a lot better."

Now another object entered the display. The shattered corpse of a once proud UNSC vessel. It rolled bow over stern, its course looking dangerously like it included an imminent collision with the battered Spirit. And judging by the speed of the hulk, a collision only a minute or so away at that.

"Don't worry Captain, it won't hit us. You think I'd endanger my survival with such a risky intersection?"

As the AI spoke, there was a distant bang, and the whole ship lurched to one side. For the two yellow suited crewmen who had just entered Cutter's field of view, there was the predictable result of making new acquaintances... with the nearest bulkhead.

"Besides, what else are these emergency manoeuvring thrusters supposed to be used for? Unwanted item disposal?"

And now, judging by the hologram, the wreck of the other ship would pass harmlessly overhead. Hopefully, anyway.

"Serina, as much as I appreciate your attempts to lighten the mood, could we cut to the chase for once?"

Serina frowned. Evidentially the lack of coffee in the captain's bloodstream was making him grouchy. She'd have to rectify that... if she got a chance anyway.

"Yes, captain. That other ship is UNSC. What it is doing out here is anyone's guess, but the transponder reads... Forward unto Dawn? Odd, not in my databanks. And for that matter, judging by what's left of the thing, neither is the ship model. Going by the size, probably a frigate or-

"Serina..."

"Captain. Very well, I'll fill you in on the rest of the situation. For 25 years or so, there isn't much to say though."

Cutter was starting to get annoyed. Had Serina always been this difficult? He decided to interrupt.

"Serina, have you tried contacting them yet?"

Serina broke off her monologue, looking a little confused.

"Uh, why? It is derelict after all, nothing could possibly be alive over there. I mean, if the lack of oxygen didn't get them, the explosive decompression certainly would have. You humans aren't

exactly well equipped for dealing with space first hand. Or hadn't you noticed?"

"And," replied Cutter, trying to keep his rising annoyance under control, "What about other AI's?"

"Well, uh..."

For once Serina looked flustered. Or was that just the image flickering?

...

Flickering? And as Cutter watched, it completely dissolved into static.

"Serina?"

Nothing. Just the faint crackling sound. And with his attention diverted, he failed to notice that the source of the problem was very much visible to him. The display of the star, the planet, and the two ships was still functional. And on it, the derelict that was the _Dawn_ was just now passing above the _Spirit_.

Ten seconds went by, with no improvement from the _Spirit_'s supposedly all powerful AI. And just when Captain Cutter thought she wasn't going to improve...

"Well, I guess I never thought of that."

...She did, with no apparent knowledge of her brief loss of existence. And now Serina was left wondering why the captain had gone silent all of a sudden.

"Uh, Captain?"

...

"Wakey, wakey captain. Come on, you've had enough sleep!"

With a jolt, Cutter dragged himself from his quiet musing. He had at least come up with a partial theory for Serina's momentary lapse of operation. But for now, they had other fish to fry.

"Serina, open a channel to the derelict."

"Aye sir. Activating ghost ship medium service."

###

UNSC Stalwart class Frigate, Forward unto Dawn

Cortana was not amused.

To be fair, this was probably her fault. She should have given John more warning for a start. Even the famed Master Chief could find himself in difficult situations after all...

But this one, took the cake.

The Chief was not amused either. If any of the Covenant, or more precisely the Elites, could see him now, his status as "the demon" would take more than a little beating.

The little Unggoy facing him probably agreed. Fresh out of the cryotube, the Chief was not yet at full strength. Which was why he was currently engaged in a wrestling match with a simple Grunt, and only just managing to hold his own.

Of course, if he'd just listen to his brain instead of his instincts, all this would be unnecessary. The stubborn little alien was chattering away madly, words that were strangely not being translated by his MJOLNIR's onboard translator. Loud it may be, but at least it hadn't yet fired the nasty looking, fully loaded Needler it was carrying. The Needler that the Chief had tried, and failed, to remove.

And now, stalemate. The Unggoy, a mere Major in rank, had somehow managed to manoeuvre him into a position where neither could exert any real pressure. So, how was he going to get out of this one?

"Oh, for heavens sake! Enough, you two!"

Cortana's voice caused a momentary halt to the struggle. But only momentary. In a burst of motion the Chief managed to take his opponent by surprise, grabbing the Needler and flinging it away. The Unggoy responded by whacking his helmet, hard, sending his head spinning. He made a mental note to never voluntarily enter cryosleep again.

"STOP. IT. NOW!" shouted Cortana. And if the Chief had been just a bit quicker looking in her direction, he would have noticed her normal blue colouring momentarily turn a much harsher red. But reluctant as he was to disengage, he failed to spot this.

The Grunt, with better reflexes (at least for now), did.

"Chief, try to keep your animal side under control. Now, very slowly, release the Unggoy and step away."

Slightly perturbed, the Chief did so. And finally, the logical part of his brain had a chance to have its voice heard. For one thing, it said to him, not all Unggoy sided with the Loyalists during the Covenant civil war. For another, this one had entered dragging a small trolley loaded with UNSC equipment too big, or unwieldy, for the diminutive alien to handle. And it, not to mention the trolley, were not floating as the lack of gravity dictated they should. Magnetised shoes and wheels apparently. So, maybe it wasn't here with hostile intent after all...

Cortana started talking again.

"Right, now that you've stopped trying to kill each other, some instructions. Chief, this is Patab."

She put quite a lot of emphasis on the "B", to the point where a third "A" almost materialised.

"Patab, this is the "demon". But you know that already, don't you?"

Patab made some kind of barking noise. Apparently the translator was still out for lunch.

"Yes, I know you had plenty of time to look in the freezer when you were tidying up. Speaking of which, you'd better go get your gear. We want to be off this thing in the next twenty minutes. You do remember the way to the Pelican, don't you?"

The Unggoy made another indecipherable sound. But judging by the way it turned and left, it must have been a yes.

The Chief waited a moment, then ensured his MJOLNIR's boots were touching the floor. A slight tweak to the programs overseeing MJOLNIR operations, and they slightly magnetised. Having the artificial gravity on would have been better, but you had to take what you had. Without complaining.

He clomped over to the holotank.

"Where did he come from?" he asked.

"To be perfectly honest, I'm not sure. I assume he ran out of ammo and retreated on board during your fight on the Ark. I only spotted him after you went into cryosleep. Strange, but UNSC sensors have a huge problem picking up his lifestreams, which is why it took the motion tracker embedded in the wall near where he'd been sleeping. After I got a new translator program running to deal with his rather odd dialect, I got him to make a few repairs â€" note the atmosphere in here â€" and put him in another cryotube. Enough details yet?"

The Master Chief nodded. It had been dangerously close to too many details.

"So, beyond the planet and the stowaway, what's the situation?"

"Well, we've been in transit for about four years. I happened to recheck the maintenance probes and find out that all of our remaining fuel, emergency thrusters tanks included, has somehow managed to leak out. Which, considering we've been grabbed by the gravitational field of this inconveniently placed planet, means our options are limited. Simply put, we grab the Pelican down in the hangar and abandon ship. It isn't a particularly attractive option, but it beats staying on board right through the screaming death dive."

"And once we're off?"

"Head down to the surface at a somewhat more manageable rate than the speed the Dawn will be trying. The planet is Terra-compatible, but beyond that I can't tell very much. Most of our sensors were up front, and we all know what happened to them. At least the Pelican survived and is flight re-

"Hold on, we're picking up a transmission. It's an old frequency, not used much now. Let's see..."

She looked distant for a moment, before another voice started blaring through the cryobay PA.

"...ire to UNSC _Forward __unto __Dawn_, do you read me? I repeat, this is UNSC _Spirit __of __Fire_ to UNSC _Forward __unto __Dawn_, are you receiving me?"

There was a minor pause, before the voice started talking again, this time to someone on her end of the link.

"Look, no-one's going to answer. That ship's deader than a Grunt at a SPARTAN party. I did tell you."

"Just keep trying Serina."

"Yes Sir... UNSC _Spirit __of __Fi_-"

"UNSC _Spirit __of __Fire_, this is Cortana, currently ship's AI for the UNSC _Forward __unto __Dawn_. Um, please hold for a second while I deal with a minor issue."

She cut the outgoing connection, allowing her to speak to the Chief.

"_Spirit __of __Fire_? Last I heard, that ship was lost after the Covenant attacked Arcadia in the early stages of the war. It jumped out system without any warning or explanation, and was never seen again."

"Until now."

"Until now. By the way, we're going to need to get out of here pretty soon, get yourself ready," she gestured at the trolley Patab had left behind "and I'll deal with the _Spirit_."

Seeing no flaw in Cortana's argument, the Chief stomped over to the trolley.

"_Spirit_, this is Cortana. To whom am I speaking?"

The trolley contained a number of spare parts for the MJOLNIR, apparently Cortana had got Patab raiding the _Dawn_'s spare equipment lockers. He grunted, then began the fiddly task of swapping out the burnt out... or nearly burnt out... components of his armour, with fresh ones from the trolley.

"This is Serina, shipboard AI of the UNSC _Spirit __of __Fire_. And the lovely gentleman you're about to speak to is our esteemed captain, James Gregory Cutter."

"Yes, yes, Serina, enough of that. Cortana, this is captain Cutter. To say this is a surprise would be understating the situation."

"The feeling's mutual, captain. I would ask what you're doing out here, but we're a little pressed for time over here."

"We?"

"Myself, one SPARTAN, and... one other. You may not have noticed, but this ship is about to enter the planet's atmosphere, and I have no options to prevent this. We're abandoning ship in about twelve

minutes."

"If that's the case, you're welcome over here. Red team in particular would be pleased to meet your SPARTAN."

"Thank you captain. We were planning to head down to the planet's surface, but you've just given us an infinitely more appealing choice."

The lights flickered slightly. Cortana frowned. "That's odd, our reactor seems to be on the blink."

She said it purely for the Chief's benefit, but Cutter heard the comment as well.

"Hold on, did I hear that right? You're having a little power problem?"

"Well, yes. With the ship in this condition, it doesn't really come as a surprise. Apart from the fact my diagnostics program shows all green."

"Interesting. It may surprise you to learn that our power supply is playing up as well. And I know our reactors are in perfect working order. I thought it might just be surges from shutting down all the cryotubes at once, but--"

"Captain!" Serina suddenly interrupted, "Reactor output falling at a critical rate! I estimate total power failure of essential systems, including life support, in approximately 25 minutes!"

"What? Serina, run diagnostics. Pinpoint the problem now!"

"Already doing so captain, I am a smart AI you know."

...

"Internal scans show no problems beyond the actual power loss. Judging by this, and the Dawn, I'd say the problem has an external source. According to sensors... Confirmed! Crazy unknown readings emanating from the planet below!"

"Any way you can stop it?"

"No captain. Not with the resources we have, or the time."

"Dammit! All right, Serina, issue evacuation warnings, get everyone off this ship, any way you can. I assume we can still abandon ship?"

"Umm... Yes sir, Pelicans, ODST drop pods and other coward's ways out all still working. Whatever this interference is, it only seems to affect larger ships. There's probably something nastier waiting for us small fry."

"One bit of good news at least. Forward unto Dawn, looks like we'll have to reschedule that rendezvous for planetside after all."

"Roger captain, we'll meet you groundside. Cortana out."

The Master Chief, having finished his business with the trolley by hauling out a trio of weapons, came over to the holotank once more.

"Time to leave?" he asked, adjusting the position of the late Sergeant Johnson's SPARTAN Laser resting on his back, then strapping the Sangheili plasma rifle and M6 magnum to his hips. Not the usual places to store them, but he had little choice.

"Yes, I think so. Unless I've forgotten something crucial. No, don't think so.

"You know the drill. Yank me."

###

UNSC Pelican dropship Gamma 91, Orbit of unknown planet

The somewhat patched looking Pelican dropship burst from the doomed frigate's hangar, and just in time. As the once proud _Forward__ unto _Dawn_ tumbled ever downward, it's surface began to glow from the heat of re-entry.

Inside the Pelican, the ambient temperature was somewhat cooler. The Chief sat in the pilot's chair, Cortana plugged in to the controls. As for Patab, the not happy at all Unggoy was further back, sitting solo in the troop bay. Apparently, it hated the sight of space, so the cockpit was a definite no-no.

Some distance in front, the vast one and a half mile long _Spirit__ of _Fire_ was clearly visible, a large quantity of lights leaving its dark hull. Some were heading straight down, relying on nothing more than simple gravity to drag them planetward.

"_Spirit_ is launching drop pods and Pelicans," stated Cortana, quite un-necessarily. "And some old Hawks and Hornets if I'm not mistaken."

Never one for un-necessary chatter, the Chief simply angled the nose of own Pelican downwards, heading on a rough intercept course for the _Spirit_'s own dropships.

As they descended, gradually getting closer and closer to the planet's surface, he peered below, through the gaps in the cloud. There wasn't much to see at this altitude, just forests, a lake or two, and mountains. Grey splotches were also visible, but before he could do much theorising on what they were, there was a shrill yammering from the cabin behind.

"Calm down Patab, we'll be down soon."

If anything, Cortana's comment made Patab's noise making even _more_ frenzied.

"Chief? I'll take over piloting for a moment, you go and see what's agitating him."

"Are you sure? I might just scare him even more."

"Just don't do anything to upset him and you'll be fine."

Back in the marine compartment, Patab had a very good reason to be upset. He'd first noticed the problem when a faint, unwanted smell had somehow managed to penetrate its way into his methane rebreather. A quick tour of the cabin, courtesy of his nose, a loosened access panel later, and...

Yes, there was a problem.

"Cortana? Our friend has a point."

Like a fire in the wires! And as the Chief watched, the portside engine stuttered. Ignoring the Unggoy's ever increasing panic, he dashed back to the cockpit.

"Let me guess," queried Cortana, "Patab picked the wrong Pelican to patch? Or just didn't read the manual?"

She didn't get a reply, apart from another stutter from the rear. Both engines this time. The Chief pushed the control stick as far forward as it would go, sending the Pelican into a nosedive.

The portside engine stuttered one last time, then died altogether.

"Chief, the Pelican won't be able to level out without its engines, these things aren't exactly aerodynamic! Pull up!"

The Chief did no such thing. "We can't glide without them either," he growled, mouth struggling with the G-forces, "I know what I'm doing."

The wispy layers of Stratus clouds approached, filled the windscreen, and were left behind. Below, a jagged hole in the towering Cumulus clouds was being torn by the falling star that was the Dawn.

"But at this rate, we'llâ€¦" Cortana paused as her thought routines finally gave her a prediction that might allow for continued existence. She calmed down slightly.

"Oh. So that's what you're up to. It's risky, butâ€¦ you've got the luck."

And now the Cumulus clouds were looming in the windscreen. The Chief made a slight heading adjustment, aiming for the hole the Dawn had cleared. He needed to see what was below after all, no need to ram into a mountain lurking in the clouds. But as he did so, three of the Pelican's manoeuvring thrusters failed as well.

Below, the patchy green began to resolve itself into individual trees.

The comm. unit chirped, the Pelicans off the Spirit finally noticing something was up. Cortana quelled it, knowing the Chief hardly needed more distractions at this time. Good thing Patab had finally shut up then, the little alien had probably passed through fear into calm acceptance, acceptance of imminent demise.

But the Chief was hopefully going to prove that acceptance unnecessary. He began to fire all remaining thrusters, trying to level out.

He almost made horizontal before the starboard engine died.

And with the Pelican still travelling at mind boggling speeds, there was little left he could do but try and minimise the size of the crater they were going to make.

The landscape flashed by. A great sea, a pair of islands. Foothills, then a massive escarpment that the Pelican only just managed to clear. Fields, mountains in the distance. Woods, a river. Trees, branches, andâ€

Nothing.

The Pelican ploughed into the ground, tearing a horrific scar through the forest as its momentum allowed it to break through spindly trees with ease. Then gradually, friction got the upper hand. The dropship slowed, and finally ground to a halt.

And there was silence.

â€

The interior of the Pelican was, to put it bluntly, a shambles. No human could have lived through that!

â€

Well, no ordinary human. And as the sensors embedded in the MJOLNIR showed stabilising lifesigns, Cortana let out a sigh.

"Well, that could have gone betterâ€"

###

Authors notes:

Well, that's it for chapter one. It was a long one for my first chapter ever, but things should go quicker from now.

I've already set up a few Chekhov's guns here, see if you can find them all. Some are fairly obvious, others you'll need to be versed in Halo backstory to find, for example, Cortana did forget something.

Oh, and Serina's lapse of operation will be covered later. If you've read Halo: The Fall of Reach, you may already know the answer.

Finally, I've only actually played Halo's 1 and 2, so anything referring to the other games comes from the Halo wiki, or the official Halo encyclopaedia. And I'll be referring to the books too.

Please read and review, feel free to offer criticism if it's constructive, and point out any errors.

Next phase: The Demon Falls to Heaven

2. Phase 2: The Demon Falls to Heaven

****Halo: Genetics****

(Author's notes at the bottom)

****Glossary and Conversions****

I regularly use miles instead of kilometres when specifying distances. For those who are unaware of the conversion rate, 1 mile is equivalent to approximately 1.61 kilometres. Or reversed, one kilometre equals 0.62 miles.

An Elk, is another name for Moose. Elk is the European term.

Tor: A rocky outcrop on top of, or close to, the summit of a hill. Usually consisting of a pile of granite boulders, sometimes with a flat top. Type "Dartmoor Tor" into Google images for examples.

Disclaimer: The Halo universe is the property of 343 Industries. For this fanfiction, and at this stage, I only own the plot and the characters _Patab_, _Tina Maloski_ and _Joseph Lenkin_. And one other who is mentioned, but I'm not naming it in this chapters disclaimer to avoid spoilers. The subjects of the final section are also mine.

****Phase 2: The Demon Falls to Heaven****

UNSC Pelican Dropship Whiskey 399, Approaching planetary surface

It was times like this that Captain Cutter _really_ regretted his previous reluctance to advance up the ranks. He could have been a fleet admiral by now, had he been so inclined. Admittedly, he would have been commanding multiple ships worth of personnel, which could have been difficult for someone with his mindset. Trying to maintain the "personal touch", something always foremost in his aspirations, would have been difficult to say the least.

But at least he wouldn't have been in _this_ situation, stuck in the marine compartment of a Pelican, deprived of his ship, with an uncertain future waiting. Oh, and having to listen to Serina stealth brag about the manoeuvre that had allowed the _Spirit_ to get so far in so little time. Something about multiple slingshots through a binary star system. As for how she'd got the ship to slow down again... he'd stopped listening by that point. He was more concerned with the looming problem of a defensive firepower deficit.

Of the _Spirit_'s original, not inconsiderable capacity, he now had a grand total of 21 Pelicans under his command, along with 4 Hornets and 5 Hawks. Only 12 of the Pelicans had managed to evac from the _Spirit_ with ground units slung beneath, 9 Warthog LRV's, a pair of Scorpion main battle tanks, and one Grizzly variant. This meant that, in a rather surprising twist on the usual situation, he had more aerial power than ground. But still limited supplies of fuel, so that wouldn't last.

And to make matters even worse, the Pelican from the Forward unto Dawn had apparently crashed headlong into a forest, which meant he was possibly down another SPARTAN. But then, they were tough as cockroaches, so maybe not.

...And he meant that cockroach comment in the nicest possible way...

"Serina, any update on our situation?"

Serina's ongoing monologue broke off as she checked the comm. chatter flashing between the small air fleet's constituent parts.

"No sir, the world isn't ending from your lack of input. Apparently Professor Anders has finally calmed down, but there's nothing else worth mentioning."

Well, that was something at least. Professor Ellen Anders had not had the usual reaction of someone who'd woken up, and been told that their ship was metaphorically doomed, i.e. to scream and run. Instead, her curiosity about the nature of their predicament had gotten the better of her, and had it not been for the captain's standing orders to get everyone off, she would have no doubt climbed into an environmental suit, and stayed behind to investigate.

But the squad of marines sent to collect her had had other ideas. Like dragging her kicking and screaming to an already overcrowded Pelican.

Now, thought the captain, there was one other task that needed seeing to.

"Maloski," he called to the pilot, "How's visibility up there? Can we see the ground yet?"

"Yes captain," came the reply.

"Right, I'm coming forward."

As he took position behind the female pilot's chair and took a look groundwards, he uncharacteristically lost his composure and gasped.

To put it simply, the view was stunning. Think Yosemite, but with everything scaled up. Craggy mountains, sprinkled with a light dusting of pure, almost faintly blue snow. Deep forests sprawled across the landscape. Fast flowing rivers too, meandering their way through the wilderness, occasionally cutting deep ravines through the hearts of hills and mountains. And that escarpment! That huge, sheer cliff face rising up nearly one and half vertical miles from a crystal clear ocean sparkling below.

Pity about the grey eyesores dotted about. Buildings if his guess was right.

Reluctantly, Cutter drew his thoughts back to the task at hand. He surveyed the landscape again, this time analysing its layout strategically.

"There," he said, pointing towards a small island in a river, some two miles from where it plummeted over the lip of the escarpment. "That will do for our base camp. Serina, relay the co-ordinates for our new alpha base."

"Alpha base, roger," the AI acknowledged, "Transmitting information on imaginatively named base number one."

One by one, the circling aircraft changed course. And now, reminded by a distant, barely visible plume of smoke, Cutter's mind began to wander back to the fate of the lone Pelican from the
Dawn...

###

UNSC Pelican Gamma 91 (Crashed), Surface of unknown planet

It was a strange sound, that finally brought the Master Chief round. A gently modulating sound, but one that nonetheless managed to sound threatening. The Chief remembered hearing something similar, a long time ago.

It had only been two, maybe three days after his abduction by the UNSC, at the grand old age of six. A lifetime away now. Dã©jã , the AI assigned to the proto SPARTAN II's as their teacher of all things historical, had shown them a recording of a pack of wolves, attacking an... elk? Well, something much larger than they were anyway. And, just before they'd ghosted into view, he'd heard a howl.

And this sound? It was worryingly similar. So, as far as he knew, a pack of wolf analogues could very well be hunting _him_. And so, for the second time in slightly under three hours, he forced himself awake.

The first sight to greet his hazy eyes, was Cortana, displayed on the Pelican's cracked comm. screen and patiently waiting for the first visible signs of life. Or, not so patiently, judging by the fingers of one hand drumming against the opposite wrist.

"You know," she said, "I've given up worrying about you. Dumb AI's would probably be calling you immortal by now, but I'd better ask anyway: Anything broken?"

Wincing at all of the bruising, the Chief checked himself over. A sprained shoulder, a lot of _very_ tender skin, a bloodstream far too saturated with MJOLNIR issued painkillers, but...

"Nothing too serious."

"You'd better not be lying to me John. I know we had a similar incident landing on Alpha Halo, but that didn't involve being _deliberately_ put to full throttle."

"I'm fine." the Chief repeated.

"Yes, well, I guess I'll believe you now. But later..."

"Anyway, we'd better get moving. The Pelican's comm. gear is wrecked, so we're going to have to find some high ground where the MJOLNIR can connect to any _Spirit_ friendlies. And fast, sunset can't be too far

off."

Now that could be a problem. If the Chief's hunch was right, and there were hostile predators out there, waiting till dark could be fatal. SPARTANs had a knack for overcoming impossible odds, but a scuffle in the dark with a pack of cooperating animals was not a pleasant prospect. Especially if the MJOLNIR injected painkillers overloaded his system and sent him to sleep.

He tugged Cortana's datachip from the Pelican's console, slotted it into his armour, then turned to the troop compartment. Compared to the disaster area of the cockpit, the marine bay had held up fairly well. A strange noise from the right drew his attention, to a shadowy corner that turned out to hold the little Grunt Patab.

The Unggoy had apparently been quite industrious in the doomed flight's last moments. It had lugged the shock absorbent pads from a dozen seats, and covered part of the compartment's forward wall with them. Then, it had simply pressed up against them, and used the pile as a giant airbag.

At least, that's what it looked like. And seeing as the alien was currently snoring, it had clearly come off better from the crash than the Chief. Somehow. Well, sleeptime was over.

The Chief gave the Unggoy a slight, well, slight for him, kick. The snoring abruptly cut off.

"Yasep?"

"Whoops," said Cortana, "Guess I'd better update your translator with that patch I mentioned. Hold on a sec."

There was silence for a moment.

"Okay, that should do for now. Couldn't fix the grammar glitch though, sorry. Patab, status."

The Unggoy groaned, and got up.

"Ohh... Me head hurt..."

"That it? You Unggoy have thick skulls."

Patab was quiet for a moment, pondering his way through Cortana's statement.

"You say we stupid?"

"No, not at all. You got the double meaning of that statement after all... What, Chief?"

"You spoke in English, how did he..?"

"Understand? Funny story. The Unggoy have a thriving black market going on their homeworld, Balaho, trading intercepted human TV shows, films, radio, music, you name it. They're human entertainment junkies. So, many of them can understand at least one of our languages, usually English. But their mouthparts don't really allow for human words..."

By now, Patab was up and moving about, retrieving his Needler and scattered ammunition. A loose plasma pistol too, neatly slotted into a makeshift holster strapped to his upper arm.

The Chief meanwhile, had made his way to the back of the Pelican. He looked behind, to check Patab had finished preparations, then reached up to pull the rear hatch emergency release.

Mercifully, it opened, revealing the grim woodland outside...

###

ROUTINE SECURITY REPORT FOR INSTALLATION R-03-ARCHON, PLANETARY SECTOR 16.

FORWARD TO MERCURIAL WISDOM

CONFIRMED OUTSIDER PRESENCE IN SECTOR 16. COMMENCING SCOUT OPERATIONS ON ENCAMPMENT. ADDITIONAL TARGETS DETECTED NEAR BORDER OF SECTOR 17, PLEASE SPECIFY ACTION.

ALSO COMMENCING ROUTINE OPERATION REGARDING CRASH SITE, ESTIMATED COMPLETION TIME IS 39 HOURS.

###

S_ilence isâ€|_

The Chief and his lumbering companion left the wreck of the Pelican, climbing steadily upwards, into the woods. The sun was getting closer to the horizon, the red light giving the woodland an almost mystical look. And even without the reddish tinge, the most mundane it could be called would beâ€| "primeval". Skeletal trees, a lack of ground cover â€" bar the odd clump of ferns here and there. Huge boulders scattered about, like the remains of a giant's stone buckshot, piercing deep into the bare soil.

And as for sound, nothing. The woods were silent, but for the shambling footsteps of the Unggoy, who was only just managing to keep up. The Chief meanwhile, was endeavouring to keep his own footfalls inaudible to the predators that he was _sure_ were tracking them. There was nothing concrete to say that they were, but for the Chief's instincts. Which, not counting a certain recent scuffle with a certain non hostile Unggoy, had a _very_ good track record.

They continued climbing, crossed a dried up stream, and headed for a tor above, looming out of the forest, a natural watchtower. There were a few hairy moments when they discovered how good Unggoy were at rock climbing, i.e. not at all, but they eventually reached the top. And the _Dawn_ trio got their first good look at the planet they had inadvertently wound up onâ€|

The view was somewhat different from the one Cutter had seen from above. Alternating plains and forests were the immediate vicinity, mountains and the more rugged terrain in the distance. And, perhaps most importantly, large structures with worryingly familiar architecture that dotted the landscape, seemingly at random.

"What is it," began Cortana, "with us finding Forerunner artefacts?"

The Chief kept quiet. It wasn't his fault after all. But after two and a bit Halo installations, the Ark, the ruins buried beneath the ONI CASTLE base on Reach, the Unyielding Hierophant (depending on just who had built it), the Forerunner Keyship, the portal, and now this, you did have to wonder.

But all wondering came to an abrupt end, when something howled in the woods below.

"What's there?"

Patab jumped carefully towards the edge of the boulder he was currently standing on, letting loose a few bursts of Needler fire. The needles failed to home in on anything. Whatever it was, it wasn't there now.

The wind began to pick up, and the sun hit the horizon.

"Chief, I've called for assistance. The good news is, there are still UNSC Pelicans airborne. The bad news, that wind will make it near impossible for one to land here. Captain Cutter has assured me that one will be sent soon, but we'll need to get to open ground."

The Chief didn't care very much for that idea, not with those wild beasts wandering around. But they had no choice. He looked outwards, towards the nearest plains, squinting against the glare of the setting sun. Even MJOLNIR light filters had their limits.

"How about there?" said Cortana, placing a nav. marker in his HUD.

The Chief looked. And balked.

"Cortana, why is your suggestion so close to that structure?" A smallish pyramid structure, rising from the grassland.

"Why not? It'll be a couple of hours before the captain can send that bird, so we might as well do some recon while we wait. Any problem with that?"

"Yes. Forerunner structures have a nasty habit of holding hostiles, and there's just two of us."

"All the more important that we have a look. We'll need to find out if something nasty does lurk inside, so that it doesn't catch us off guard later. Or are you telling me you couldn't handle a few Sentinels?"

"She had him there. And he did know how to deal with Sentinels, unlike the as of yet unseen wildlife. But there was one potential problem, he thought, looking at Patab.

â€¦

What was the universe coming too, him worried about a Grunt?

###

Cortana got her way. Again. The Chief had planned to reach the structure, and simply set up camp in the doorway. That way he could defend against any predators, while any Forerunner defences would hopefully discredit them as non-threatening.

But when they got that far, the AI had insisted that they might as well go further. And so, to save the Chief's ears, the two outsiders were gradually moving further in. And so farâ€¦ nothing hostile whatsoever. Patab was starting to get cocky.

"Why you so worried?" he asked, plodding up to another triangular door, which opened just like all the rest. Revealing yet another ramp, curving slightly as it sloped ever downwards. The Chief was starting to wonder if they would ever get to the bottom.

Another door, this one leading into a welcome break from the ramps. It was another one of those antechambers they kept passing, lit with a much softer light than the ever descending slopes. And, just like the others, there was a third hatch to the entrance and exit. The Chief automatically wandered over and checked it. Nope, still nothing of interest. Just another dead end "bubble room", as Patab had neatly put it. A dome of a ceiling, a ring of seats around the walls, and a pedestal in the centre. And that was it.

"That's it," Cortana suddenly announced. "I've had enough of these mystery rooms. Time to find out what they're really for."

And with that, she was gone, transmitted out of the armour via the comm. system. Patab, having heard none of that, took the lack of movement towards the next ramp as a sign of rest. With the predictable next step being to trudge to the bubble room, and plonk himself down on one of the seats.

For about two seconds. Then it rose a few inches, and somehow flicked him off.

"Well, that's interesting," came Cortana's voice, emanating from the pedestal. Some sort of control interface, judging on the way it had suddenly lit up. "Chief, get over here."

Get over here? Since when had she been so abrupt? But he did as he was ordered, stepping over Patab as he did so. The little Grunt was almost visibly seeing stars.

"What is it Cortana?" he asked.

"I've found out what this structure is for. Remember the Silent Cartographer? Well, this would be the... oh, it would be easier to just show you."

The door slammed shut, jolting Patab back to full alertness. "Oh no, this not good!" the Grunt exclaimed. Then the room jerked.

"Me have bad feeling!"

"Patab, you Unggoy always "have bad feeling". Settle down, it's misplaced for once."

And as Cortana spoke, the concave ceiling turned transparent, along with the walls. Revealing, in all its glory, a _vast_ six or so armed, barred spiral galaxy. _Underground_?

"And presenting, our very own Milky Way. Chief, the internal systems refer to this facility as the "Melodious Cartographer". Every planet the Forerunners discovered, every star, is hologrammatically displayed here. The scale is consistent as well, about ten centimetres to each light year, with the whole chamber being about one and a half kilometres wide. And if we select a star system, we get a zoomed view of all of its components. The information stored here... it just beggars belief! Fancy a demonstration?"

"NO!" cried the SPARTAN and the Grunt together... if for different reasons. The Chief was aware of the looming pickup, while Patab... was just scared.

But like Cortana was going to listen to them...

###

EMERGENCY UPDATE " FOR THE IMMEDIATE ATTENTION OF MERCURIAL WISDOM

OUTSIDERS HAVE ACCESSED THE MELODIOUS CARTOGRAPHER. PROTOCOL ARTICLE 194 DEMANDS TERMINATION OF INTRUDERS. HOWEVER, THIS CONFLICTS WITH THE MORE RECENT PROTOCOLARTICLE 287. PLEASE CONFIRM NEXT COURSE OF ACTION.

###

Cortana's running monologue was unexpectedly cut short. Neither of her two captive audience realised why; she was listening in on a surprisingly overt communication. Well, overt for in here " outside the facility the message would probably be undetectable.

Actually, neither of them even noticed the pause, because the floating platform the bubble room had become suddenly jerked to a halt. The faint lighting took on a reddish hue.

A deep voice boomed from an unknown source. "***Warning, unauthorised use of Cartographer facility detected. This facility will enter lockdown mode if valid security clearance is not given. You have one minute to comply**."

"Cortana..." the Chief stated, almost accusingly, mirrored by Patab's... "Katana"? Another mistake from the translator.

"What? It's not like this was my fault."

"Just find a way to shut it down."

"On it."

Cortana went quiet as she accessed the facility network and hacked her way into the secure portions. She grumbled irritably, and double checked the protocols she'd just found. Then... was that a mild chuckle?

All of a sudden the Chief was reminded that she was dangerously close

to rampancy, at least if all those seven year theories were correct.

"Sorry John, but I can't do that."

John? Why had she called him that, why now? Now the Chief was really getting worried.

"What? Why not?" he cautiously asked.

"Because I don't have the means to cancel the lockdown. We need a password. One that is found by taking a base code, which I don't have, using a time mutating transfiguration formula, which I also don't have, and feeding the result in. And as the computer then links to another location to check if the received password is correct, I can't just yank it out of the system. In other words, we're stuck here for all infinity."

And, right on cue, the announcement "***Lockdown commencing**." echoed across the facility.

"Time mutating transfiguration formula?"

"Oh don't tell me you can't work that one out." She sounded angry.
"Alright, I'll spell it out to you..."

"Simply put, the base code isn't enough on its own, we need to mutate it using the transfiguration formula. But the formula mutates as well, with the passage of time. If you don't know the rules governing the formula's mutation, the original formula, AND the base code, you can't figure out what the password is at present. Got it yet?"

"I... think so." the Chief said, reluctantly. He was more concerned with Cortana's sudden mood shift.

"So, how do we get out of here?" he asked again.

"We don't... unless..." The last came almost as if she had just thought of something. But even Patab realised that she probably didn't have their interests 100% in mind at the moment.

"What Katana say? Me not hear..."

"For good reason, I didn't. Chief, I found a reference to a "Genetics sensor"... probably a DNA reader. If I'm right, place your hand over that blue patch on the pedestal. Hopefully your status as a "Reclaimer" is clearance enough."

"But, the password-"

Cortana let out an exasperated sigh. "It's an alternative, not a supplementary system. Now, are you going to activate it, or are we going to wait for security to come-a-calling?"

"**Sentinel security teams en route to investigate security breach**." Boomed the voice, almost as if Cortana knew. In the distance a number of ceiling mounted ports opened, disgorging pure white light that was almost immediately eclipsed by emerging objects. The Sentinels no doubt. And something else, something much... larger. Patab began charging his plasma pistol.

And as for the Chief... he was hurriedly removing a gauntlet. Sure, he'd fought plenty of Sentinels before, beaten them too, but on a platform as small as this? One floating in the middle of a void, where one low placed beam from a Sentinel would take out the hover mechanism and send them all screaming to their deaths? And there wasn't a lake below, so hoping for a repeat of that incident on Delta Halo was a long shot even for him.

"Better hurry up Chief," announced Cortana, as the shapes of the approaching Sentinels began to get a little too distinct for comfort. The large one had energy shields reminiscent of a Jackal's.

The gauntlet came off, revealing the Chief's pasty white hand. Well, when was the last time his skin had seen sunlight? He took one last check of his surroundings, subconsciously aware that Cortana was being more than a little manipulative, then placed his palm on the supposed bio-scanner.

"**Reserve genetic sensor option activated**." The voice announced. "**Reading â€" Reclaimer**." "**You are authorised for Cartographer use**." "**Cancelling lockdown**."

The dim lighting returned to a calmer faint blue. This revealed the second group of Sentinels that had been approaching from below, but before Patab could discharge his humming, overcharged plasma pistol at them, they turned and headed back towards their deployment conduits. A course of action mirrored by the first, more overt group. The Chief was not upset to see the back of that big one.

Cortana let out a sigh. "Well, that worked surprisingly well. So, what do you want to look at?"

"I don't. I think we should count our blessings and get out of here. We've got a Pelican to rendezvous with."

"But Chief, we might as well check a few things while we're here. Like just where "here" is."

The Chief glanced at Patab, but the Unggoy was currently trying to find a way to return his pistol to an uncharged state... without firing it off. But really, what harm could one check do?

"Very well Cortana," he said. And quickly added something else he'd just thought of. "And find out where Earth is in relation to us. We'll need to know for when we get off this rock."

"If, Chief, if. Right, current location." The platform started moving, heading for the top of the mammoth chamber. They passed by nebulae, gas giants, ringed worlds, all perfectly formed in the hologrammatic medium. The sheer scale and detail of the vast virtual galaxy completely laid to shame the pale imitation of the Ark's Cartographer.

"According to the reference banks, Earth doesn't exist. Strange, because we know the Forerunners got there. They must have purposefully left it out of this system's database. I wonder why? I could probably work out its location from the positioning of other systems, but it would take some time..."

"Don't worry about it now, we'll come back later. So where are we now?"

"Patience, Chief. We'll be there in a moment."

The platform breached the upper surface of the galaxy like a surfacing whale, and came to a halt by a single shining speck. A star. And, if you looked closely and squinted, you could just make out a miniscule planet circling it.

"Well, here we are. The network's saying Reclaimers don't have the clearance to access specific knowledge, but it is offering three names. Archon, the planet, Villein, the star, and... Balance? But what could that be?"

...

"File deleted? What? Not simply locked but _deleted_?"

The Chief had another look at the MJOLNIR's chronometer. 20 minutes until the supposed Pelican arrival time.

"Cortana, we'd better leave."

"But Chief, the information stored here! I have to extract it!"

"_Now_, Cortana!"

"Can't you just leave me in the system for a while? You did back on Alpha Halo after all!"

"No, I am not walking to wherever our allies have setup their base. Nor am I leaving you behind, not after last time!"

Seeing as "last time" had involved an internment with the Gravemind, Cortana grudgingly gave up. Even though she believed that curiosity killed the _Cat_, not some random AI.

She fed one last instruction into the platform's guidance systems, an order to return to the docking port, and returned herself to the MJOLNIR's liquid crystal layer, for some reason staying mostly out of the data chip in the helmet.

Unfortunately, desperate as the Chief was to leave, he failed to spot something fairly important. As the platform descended back through the virtual galaxy, it passed a rather innocuous looking system. And, just then, one of the labels attached to said system "Erde-Tyrene" suddenly got a little longer.

But, as it was, it would be some time before the consequences of this change would come crashing down upon them...

###

UPDATED SECURITY REPORT FOR THE MELODIOUS CARTOGRAPHER

FORWARD TO MERCURIAL WISDOM

OUTSIDER PRESENT IN THE FACILITY IS CONFIRMED TO BE RECLAIMER. ALSO

PRESENT IS ONE MEDDLER, CATEGORY H. RECOMMEND INSTALLATION R-03 ALERT STATUS RAISED TO CODE 3.

###

Archon - Sector 16, Exterior of Melodious Cartographer facility

The sun had long set by the time the Chief and the Unggoy finally emerged from the Melodious Cartographer. Only the faintest of glows marked the western horizon, but there was still a fair bit of light. The Milky Way filled the sky, countless stars each contributing a tiny bit of light to Archon's surface. It wasn't particularly bright down here, but at worst it was still enough to see where you were going.

Unless you were an Unggoy. Patab couldn't stop tripping over every little stone, as he wandered almost drunkenly after the Chief.

"This is Whiskey three ninety nine, callsign Arctic Claw, to friendly UNSC forces, please respond. I repeat, this is Whiskey three ninety nine to Forward unto Dawn survivors, please reply. As instructed I am on station and requesting pickup coordinates."

The female pilot's voice broke through the MJOLNIR's earpieces, just as a familiar shape cleared a copse to the west, heading in the general direction of the tor the duo had climbed earlier. But before the Chief could respond...

"Yaargh!" screamed Patab, as a shadowy form pounded into view, leaping at the Chief and bowling him over. And wouldn't you know it, the time in the Melodious Cartographer and the lack of resistance had allowed the Chief to forget about the mystery creature and drop his guard. Well, the animal now scrabbling futilely at his armour may have got the first strike, but that was the last time it would get its own way.

He drew his arm back, and slugged the creature, sending it flying with a startled yelp. Almost immediately, there was a familiar cha-cha-cha sound, and a trio of glowing crystal needles impacted the creature. This time it howled.

"Whiskey three ninety nine, that request for pickup at this time had better not been a prank call, we don't have the fuel for unnecessary trips halfway along the escarpment."

The Chief flicked on his helmet flashlight, the circle of light revealing the snarling beast. It did look surprisingly like a wolf, albeit one twice the size of your average lupine, with very spiky fur. He didn't doubt that trying to touch it barehanded would hurt. And those proto tusks flanking the mouth didn't look pleasant either.

The beast snarled one last time, then charged again. In a flash the Chief drew his M6 Magnum and fired a single shot, hitting the creature square between the eyes. And then he was staring in disbelief as the thing kept on coming! It leapt at him again, but this time an armoured gauntlet intercepted its throat and swatted it away. But barely had it hit the ground, than it was up again. The Chief was vaguely aware of Patab backing away, into the

darkness.

"Whiskey three ninety nine, If I don't get an acknowledgement soon, you can walk back yourself."

"Whiskey three ninety nine this is Cortana, hold your horses. We've got a little wildlife problem here."

The Chief swapped his Magnum for the Sangheili plasma rifle, letting loose a flurry of bolts. Another barrage of Needler rounds arced out of the gloom. This time the creature shrieked. But single minded in the extreme, it started to try for round three.

"Whiskey three ninety nine to Cortana, if you're up against what I think you are, go for overkill. They're already notorious for their difficulty to put down."

Slightly limping this time, the beast leaped for the Chief again. And once again, he batted it aside. Then, while it was still tumbling through the air, he dropped the plasma rifle, reached behind and grabbed hold of the SPARTAN laser.

"Survive _this_" he growled, charging the weapon up. The creature was already getting to its feet. It didn't bother snarling this time, tensing itself to charge again. It pushed off and that was when the fully charged SPARTAN laser blasted straight through it, and out the other side.

There wasn't much of the creature left to hit the ground.

"Wow, I saw that one from up here! Okay, I think I know where you are now, but I'd like confirmation. Could you signal your position again?"

The Chief, unwilling to use another 20% of the SPARTAN laser's limited battery, looked around for an alternative. He didn't have to look far, because at that moment Patab lumbered out of the gloom, his plasma pistol glowing from an overcharge. That'd do!

"Patab," he ordered, "Discharge that straight up."

The Grunt looked baffled. "Huh? Why me do that?"

"Just do it."

Deciding that arguing with a SPARTAN, particularly one now at full strength, was probably not a good idea, Patab complied. A glowing ball of plasma slowly rose to the heavens, basking the area in a sickly green glow.

"Okay, I've got you. Starting my approach."

"Hold on!" Cortana suddenly blurted out, "Patab! Get to cover!"

"Why?"

"Just go!"

Grumbling, Patab clomped off behind a handily placed rock. Meanwhile,

the whine of the incoming Pelican reached a crescendo, and it soared into view. The pilot activated the searchlights, and slowly descended. Almost before the aircraft touched ground, a quartet of marines were hopping out. One of them, reading in the Master Chief's HUD as Corporal Joseph Lenkin, looked at the remains of the predator with a queasy look on his face.

"Well, now that makes me feel better," he finally remarked, if one of these even gives a SPARTAN trouble."

"You've encountered them before, corporal?" asked Cortana over the MJOLNIR speakers.

The marine gave the Chief a weary look. "Yeah, that we have. A pack of them decided to look for dinner in Alpha base this evening. It took the Warthog LAAG's to finally put them down, and even then they took a long time to die. Dire Thorns we've nicknamed them. Lost nearly twenty marines to the four of them."

"Didn't your captain say you had a Red team? Your own SPARTAN's?"

"Yep. But the captain apparently sent them out to look for more obvious threats than wildlife. They were three miles upriver when the Thorns wandered in.

"Now, we were told there'd be two of you to pick up. Where's the other fella?"

"Uhâ€¦"

The Chief took over. "This might come as a bit of a shock, but things have happened since your ship disappeared."

"What kind of thingsâ€¦"

"We'd prefer to brief your captain first. But as for here, make safe your weapons."

The corporal gave the Chief a suspicious look, but did as he was told. The other marines followed suit.

"Now, brace yourselves." The Chief turned towards Patab's hiding place and gestured.

The Grunt ambled into the light. The marines had the predictable response.

"Bleeping hell!" exclaimed one of them, swinging his MA5B assault rifle around to target the little alien. The Chief put a hand out to stop him actually firing. Well, the safety catch was still on, but better safe than sorry.

"Hold your fire, he's a friend."

"Like hell he is!" the marine shot back, and promptly found the assault rifle being forcibly removed from his grasp.

"All of you," interjected Cortana, "Hold. Your. Fire." She sounded angry. "This Unggoy is coming back with us. Alive. If it makes you

feel better, just think of him as a POW."

"I don't knowâ€|" muttered Corporal Lenkin.

"Look, will it help if he gives up his weapons until we've cleared him with the captain? He's not exactly a Sangheili or Jiralhanae, he can't do much with his bare hands."

"Sangheili? Jiralhanae?" asked another marine.

"Elites and Brutes. And that's off topic."

"Hurry up out there Lenkin!" called the Pelican's pilot, "Just let the damn thing on so we can go home!"

"Jeez," the corporal complained, "I never signed on for this! Fine, he can come. But we will be disarming him until further notice!"

"Conditions accepted corporal," answered Cortana, callously ignoring Patab's opinions on the matter. "Let's get moving."

###

Archon â€" Orbit

While the Pelican dusted off and turned back east, heading for the fledgling marine encampment, something significant was happening high above. Unnoticed by anyone planetside, more visitors had arrived.

A small, rainbow coloured rift in the fabric of the universe was abruptly torn asunder. From within emerged, one after another, eight small craft. They accelerated towards the planet, the rift sealing itself behind them.

Four of the newcomers looked like they had no right being in space. Their shape was similar to old harriers of the twenty first century, which begged the question of how they were manoeuvring in the vacuum of space with the same ease that should have been reserved for within an atmosphere. Meanwhile, another three of the newcomers were clearly fighters â€" long thin affairs with stalk mounted engines that swivelled and twisted, sending them this way and that.

And as for the last newcomerâ€| little could be made out apart from its size â€" about half as large again as a Pelican dropship â€" but it did seem to have a somewhat less conventional shape â€" a large disc of unknown purpose strapped to its back, and it almost seemed to have _limbs_.

The group split up, the fighters and harrier look-a-likes settling into different orbits that would allow them to collectively observe the vast majority of the planet's surface. The remaining newcomer simply stopped cold, using minor attitude thrusters to maintain position.

Had the ruling intelligence of Archon not been so fixated with the UNSC troops already on the surface, and more precisely how it could turn them to its advantage, it might have noticed this second wave of visitors. But no, despite multiple alerts from various ground based observational facilities, it didn't.

And neither did it notice when two of the imitation harriers each released a quartet of tiny drones, all heading rapidly downwardsâ€|

###

Authors notes:

All right, I admit it! I made a mistake with the whole Patab versus Master Chief business. I was more working on their strength, I mean, they lug massive fuel rod cannons and occasionally (Halo 2, player invoked) rocket launchers into battle with ease. But, I've since looked at the in game sizesâ€| and they're roughly half the size of the Chief. Oops. Still, it had comedy factor if nothing else, but I'm not likely to repeat it.

Cortana seems to be acting odd. I'm of the opinion that she has yet to reach the theoretical state of _metastability_, so try and figure out what stage of rampancy she's at. The Halo wiki should make that task quite easy.

The "something muchâ€| larger" amongst the swarm of Sentinels is an Enforcer. Seeing as neither the Master Chief or Cortana actually encountered one, I've left it unnamed in the story. For now, anyway.

The "Me have bad feeling" line shows up in Halo 1 and 2. Typically before something unpleasant shows up, but this time there's a twist. You'll find out what later.

The Dire Thorns may sound a little extreme for mere wildlife, and their target selection is a bit iffy, but there's more to them than meets the eye. Again, later.

The next phase will have the first proper combat, and the first vehicles. As I'm starting university though, it may be a while coming. Hopefully not too long.

Thanks for reading, please review!

Next Phase: Running with Warthogs

3. Phase 3: Running with Warthogs

****Halo: Genetics****

(Author's notes at the bottom)

Disclaimer: The Halo universe is the property of 343 Industries. For this fanfiction, and at this stage, I only own the plot and the characters _Patab_, _Tina Maloski_, _Joseph Lenkin_, _Samantha Gordez_, _Carther_ and _Drane_. There's also a Carl. Certain gatecrashers later on are also mine.

****Phase 3: Running with Warthogs****

Archon â€" Sector 16

UNSC Pelican Dropship Whiskey 399, Approaching Alpha Base

Tina Maloski, the pilot of UNSC Pelican dropship Whiskey three ninety nine, heaved a quiet sigh of relief as the lights of Alpha base became visible, a veritable nest of fireflies on the ground. There was still a fair bit of activity down there; with so little material having been carried down from the Spirit, the illegal human immigrants were having to establish the base using tents. Other humans - mostly navy crewers but with the odd marine as well - were using crude hand axes and other tools to clear most of the island's tree cover and undergrowth. After the Dire Thorn incursion, they wanted the number of hiding places down to a minimum.

Following instructions from the recently installed air traffic control - a feature of the base not present when she had lifted off 90 minutes earlier - Maloski flew her Pelican over the eastern of the two island access points, a narrow ford guarded by three Warthogs and the Grizzly. The instructions from the flight traffic controller led her towards what was charitably referred to as a "landing pad". Plain old circle of dirt was the only way to honestly describe it, plain old circle of dirt with an uneven circle of field lanterns and stones for a border.

Corporal Joseph Lenkin was, once again, out before the Pelican had quite touched dirt. One day he'd push that too far, and break something. The second marine, Samantha Gordez, erred on the side of caution and waited a moment before following suit. The other two... remained inside, watching their unwanted passenger. The latest SPARTAN, apparently none simply by his rank of Master Chief, took surprisingly long to hop out, apparently being concerned for the safety of his Grunt companion. If the idea hadn't been so ridiculous, Maloski would have suspected him of being an Elite in disguise or something.

But at least the delay did some good. It meant that captain Cutter had a chance to compose himself from his brisk walk from the other end of the island. And from spotting the familiar red pyramid shape visible at the other end of the Pelican's troop compartment. Tina strained to hear his words.

"This day keeps getting better and better," he said, as the Chief reached him and saluted. "My ship inexplicably fails on me, I lose twenty marines to a pack of animals, my SPARTAN team decides to go on a little unauthorised scouting trip, we're low on supplies, and just before you arrived my AI opted to take an unannounced nap. And now I find that our one bright spot, our new SPARTAN, has a blasted Covenant in tow. Care to explain why?"

Now Maloski's co-pilot was also eavesdropping. As was everyone in earshot, she suspected. Anyone who wasn't, wasn't human. The AI inhabiting the SPARTAN's armour was the next to speak.

"Which story would you like captain? Long or short?"

"Short. With Serina, my AI, out of order, I don't have time to listen all night. So make your answer convincing, otherwise your choices are the brig, or trying your luck with the Dire Thorns."

For someone with no physical body to speak of - or even the image of one - Cortana managed to emanate her opinion on that quite well,

going by the sudden chilly aura emanating from the Chief's direction. Maloski seriously doubted the SPARTAN was to blame.

â€|

"Okay sir, the "brief" version." Cortana paused for a moment, probably trying to figure out the best way to compress 25 dismal years (and 1 very eventful year) into as short a lecture as possible.

"Right then. Following the battle of Arcadia, the war went badly for us. We lost one colony after another, and in August 2552, we even lost Reach. This was despite the efforts of the vast majority of surviving SPARTAN II's and a number of SPARTAN III's, which should give you some idea of how dire the battle was. The Master Chief and I escaped on the UNSC Pillar of Autumn - which I believe you encountered over Arcadia shortly before your disappearance. And this is where things get really crazy.

"After a slipspace jump that was less random than usual, we found ourselves in the vicinity of a giant ring world built by the Forerunners... that ancient race that left structures and artefacts littered across the galaxy. The Covenant, having followed us from Reach, were somewhat ungrateful considering we'd just inadvertently led them to something they'd been searching for. Their mandate basically revolved around them activating this "Halo", to propel them on "the Great Journey". But it turned out that the ring was a super weapon, part of a network designed to wipe out all sentient life in the galaxy, thus starving a parasitic lifeform called "the Flood". Luckily, we managed to destroy the Halo before it could be fired.

"After this, the Covenant attacked Earth. We drove off the first wave, inadvertently found another Halo in the process, and indirectly caused the Covenant to split into two. The Flood resurfaced, and the Covenant still loyal to their Prophets launched another attack on Earth. With the assistance of the Separist faction, we forced them out again, and stopped a Flood outbreak on Earth. Then we tracked the Covenant loyalists to another Forerunner facility known as the Ark, took them out, and fired a Halo to stop the local Flood infestation. This led to us being stranded in deep space for three and a bit years, until earlier today.

"Oh, and Patab is a Covenant Separist, one of the UNSC's allies."

"I find that hard to believe," started one of the Unggoy's guards, only to be cut off by a gesture from Cutter. The grizzled captain gazed at them for a while, apparently gauging whether they were telling the truth or not. Finally, he spoke.

"That is one hell of a tale, one that I would have dismissed as nonsense. But, as I believe you said to the Corporal here, things have happened. Portions of your story sound a little too close to experiences we have had, experiences I'd just as soon forget..."

"So you believe us?" Cortana asked, seemingly forgetting that she was a smart AI.

"About the Flood and the Forerunners? I'd be a fool not to. As a matter of fact, I suspect we've encountered the Flood ourselves. And

I can see the Covenant viewing them as a great enough threat to temporarily halt their crusade on humanity.

"However, I'm still not convinced about the idea of a Human - Covenant alliance. Call it a consequence of being a veteran - you don't get to be one without taking life veerry cautiously."

The Chief glanced back at Patab, who looked somewhat calm considering it was his fate being discussed. Well, sure, he was trembling, but who wouldn't when a pair of assault rifles were jammed right in their face?

"So, what are you going to do with him?" he asked.

"Normally, there wouldn't be any point discussing it. But, this time we'll deviate from standard procedure. I'll confine him to a tent, one close to my location so no vengeful marine gets any ideas, and keep an eye on him. As for later, we'll decide what to do for the long term then. Corporal!"

Corporal Lenkin snapped to attention. "Yes Sir!"

"Take the Grunt and place him under guard in tent 21. Then show the SPARTAN here to the area red team claimed before they left on their scouting trip. After that, you and your team should get some rest. I'll want you to report to the command centre at sunrise."

"Sir, yes Sir!" the marine saluted. Then he and his team collected the Grunt, and set off towards the larger tents, the Chief in tow. Cutter watched them go. Then he turned back to the Pelican.

"Flight Officer Maloski." he called softly, voice carrying easily to the Pelican's cockpit. Tina exchanged looks with her copilot.

"Yes, captain?"

"A word of advice. I'm a lenient man, but I draw the line with ONI spooks. I suggest you refrain from imitating them from now on."

Sensing he was letting the eavesdropping slide - this time - she simply remained silent as the captain turned and walked away.

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#####Security Issues#####

Archon - Sector 16, Leaving Alpha base

One hour after sunrise, two pairs of Warthog LRV's were leaving Alpha base. One pair " Scout team Bravo " crossed the ford and headed west. Their goal was to investigate the crash site of the _Forward unto Dawn_, to see if any food and ammunition could be recovered. A long shot, but at least they weren't being asked to find working vehicles.

Meanwhile, Scout team Charlie" Scout team Charlie had the _difficult_ job.

The lead Warthog crossed the metallic bridge that connected the island to the western shore, and turned north. Corporal Lenkin looked back, making sure the other Warthog was following, then gunned the accelerator. A short distance ahead, another Forerunner structure, this one a low, flat structure, a number of unidentifiable protuberances blanketing the roof. The captain was understandably concerned with its proximity to Alpha base, so he was sending a small team to check it out. Small meaning one man.

The Warthog hit a shallow ditch, the jolt from the landing causing a multitude of swearing from three of the four passengers. Aware that continuing at this speed might result in a miserable night for him when the other marines tracked him down, Lenkin slowed down a little. What he didn't get, was how the grassy plain had looked so smooth from the bridge " out here it was anything but. Just to prove his point, two low rises came in rapid succession.

Up ahead, a blur became visible. It quickly resolved itself into the form of a weary ODST, slowly trudging in from wherever his droppod had deposited the poor sod. A wonder the Dire Thorns hadn't got him, but at least that was another survivor to bolster the approximately 300 strong personnel count. The number would have been lower, but the Helljumpers were elite troops after all. And so, despite their SOIEV pods scattering all across the region, there had been a steady trickle of latecomers managing to stagger in.

A couple more minutes traversing the rolling grass, and the Warthogs arrived at the structure's base. They paused, just long enough for a solitary armoured giant to jump off and start marching towards the wide ramp descending into the interior. And then, with nary a look back, they drove off towards the southeast, seeking to rejoin the river and follow it upstream.

The bus service was over. Now the real mission would begin, a lone scout trip into uncharted wilderness. But at least they had sufficient weaponry. The Warthog LAAGs, the Warthogs themselves, and two marines per Warthog armed with M19 rocket launchers and assault rifles. One marine over the standard LRV complement, but the captain was understandably concerned for his trooper's safety. Hence the extra passenger hanging on in the back.

Finding potential threats was a risky task. But Corporal Lenkin couldn't help but worry for the lone SPARTAN they'd left behind. How was he doing, alone but for an AI?

###

The SPARTAN had in fact, stalled. The reason was fairly simple, it consisted of one very imposing looking blast door sitting just at the bottom of the entrance ramp. As usual, the Forerunners had left the relevant control panel off to one side, but someone around here clearly cared more for security than 343 Guilty Spark had. If that Monitor had been in charge, the panel would responded to the merest hint of an inquisitive hand by opening up, but apparently Archon played things differently. Odd that Halo installations would have the lower grade security; Cortana had made some comment about 2401 Penitent Tangent being as bad as Spark, so it seemed the issue was universal.

Apart from here. After the Chief had failed to get anywhere, despite

his usual instincts on such matters, Cortana had chosen to hop out of his armour again. Now she was apparently rampaging through the local network, trying to find some way to circumvent that damn morphing password system!

Five minutes passed with not a peep from the vagrant AI. Finally, the Chief had had enough.

"Any progress?" he asked, trying to keep the impatience from seeping into his voice.

"Not yet. And the more you ask, the slower I'll be. Don't forget, I'm carrying the Alpha Halo Index â€" that's a lot of data clogging up my thought routines. So if I were you, I'd stop distracting me."

She went silent again. But not for long this time.

"Chief, stop fidgeting out there. It's off-putting."

Huh? Since when did he fidget? He was a SPARTAN, he was used to staying perfectly motionless for hours on end. Sure, it was usually from lying in ambush rather than a simple case of nothing to do, but stillâ€|

"Okay, I've found something. Alchemist security has a second time morphic password system. This one is to confirm that the verification message from wherever the primary password is checked is genuine. If I'm lucky â€" or just plain clever â€" I may be able to work through the problem from this end."

"So you've nearly finished?"

"Not quite. I also need to find a way to quash the outgoing verification query, without the system noticing. And I've already identified quite a few failsafes designed to raise the alarm if I try it straight off. Seems the Melodious Cartographer's easy security was A-typical. Whatever's in here must be important."

"Any idea what it is? I'd rather not open another Flood containment facility if we can help it."

"Oh, I'm sure we won't be letting them out, not with a name like "Alchemist". It doesn't fit. Now stop sidetracking me, I need to concentrate."

Now it was the Chief's turn to shut up. Obedient in the extreme, just as someone who's been in the military since the age of six should be. But what he didn't realise, was that Cortana didn't need him to sidetrack her. She was already sidetracked, looting the system for every spare bit of information she could find.

And so the Chief was in for a long, boorrrring morning. So maybe we'd better see where Scout team Charlie has got toâ€|

###

#####_A Drive in the Country_#####

Corporal Lenkin was currently staring at the ugly face of a Thorn. But this time, the sight didn't concern him in the slightest. This

may have had something to do with the SPARTAN sitting on top of it, busy gutting the dead creature with a knife. Behind himâ€| or her â€" he had no idea which one it actually was â€" the other two SPARTANS of red team were busy cleaning their own daggers. Another deceased Dire Thorn could be seen behind them, dumped at the base of a tree.

The SPARTAN engaged in the dissection exercise briefly looked up, nodding to the pair of Warthogs passing them on the other side of the tumbling river. And that was it for acknowledgement. Before long, the vehicles had rounded the next bend in the river, and the wayward red team was lost to view.

The Warthog's front wheels hit another rock, causing a sharp expletive from Samantha Gordez, as her armour impacted the LAAG she was clinging to.

"Dammit Jitters, do you have to hit every single rock deliberately?" she yelled.

Jitters? Just for that, Lenkin did hit the next one deliberately. Not that it was difficult. This crude track the Warthogs were following may have been fairly easy for the big wheels of the LRV's to handle, but the sheer number of bumps and potholes were not making life pleasant for the marines. Of course, the question arose of why there was even a track here in the first place - no local ground based vehicles after all - but at the moment Lenkin was grateful for small mercies. Otherwise, the forest would have been nearly impossible to navigate... not counting the option of walking of course.

That whole Jitters thing was getting to him. When he'd first received the moniker, from sergeant Forge no less, he'd been your average run of the mill greenie, one who'd got creeped out over every little sound, every slight motion. But admittedly, he had been a good early warning radar. But then, Arcadia and the shield world had happened, and he had been forced to stop yelping, or shuffle off this mortal coil. And probably into the realms of the undead, but thankfully he'd missed that ship.

The Warthog glided splashed across a shallow creek, jolting again as it emerged from the water. And a good thing too, because it drew Lenkin's attention forward... just in time to spot the massive wall of rock charging towards him at 300 miles an hour. Or so it seemed. Regardless, he slammed on the brakes.

The four marines in Warthog A took a few moments to recover. Behind them, gales of laughter could be heard emanating from the other vehicle. Corporal Lenkin glared at the marine riding shotgun.

"Any reason you didn't warn me of this?" he half growled. The marine grinned.

"Hey, the driver should keep his eyes on the road. Me and my friend here," (he patted the upper tube of his rocket launcher) "have other things to do." He mimed blasting something offensive, possibly a Thorn. Lenkin scoffed.

"Hah. Admit it Carl, you were just taking advantage of the quiet period to have a quick snooze."

"Who, me? Would I really do that, corporal?"

"That doesn't even deserve an answer. How about you two in the back? Did either of you spot this dirty great cliff?"

"You must be joking!" grumbled the extra complement marine, Drane, "In this position?" Considering he had his back jammed against the rear of the cabin and was thus facing backwards, he had a point. Which left Samantha. Who opened her lovely mouth and... spewed out the usual garbage.

"Lenkin, only a complete and utter moron couldn't see whose bleeding fault it is. Just shut the you-know-what up and drive!"

One day he was going to have to work on that vocabulary of hers. But seeing as she was a corporal, the same rank as him, that could be a problem. Of course, what little scuttlebutt there was floating around Alpha base suggested the captain could have earmarked him for promotion, although - assuming it was true of course - it was probably more due to a lack of officers, than a sign of general faith in his abilities. Those monsters had hit the Spirit's complement hard.

Meanwhile, a sentence - spoken in a slightly mocking fashion - wafted up from the Warthog behind.

"Hey, Lenkin, figured out who to blame yet?"

Carther's micro squad hooted, a fresh round of raucous laughter aimed at their "friendly" rivals. Goodness knew why captain Cutter kept bundling them together. Well, at least there was an easy way to shut them up.

"Yeah, whatever Carther. But if I were you, I'd be more concerned about that Thorn trying to bite your behind."

All laughter abruptly cut off as Carther's team quietly went into panic mode, swinging their weapons all over the place. But after a couple of moments...

"Ha ha. Very funny. Now if you'll- Holy Shite, there is one there as well!"

Carther promptly opened up with his Warthog LAAG, targeting a dense patch of undergrowth just up the creek. To say the stealthily advancing predator got a nasty shock, would be to leave no way of describing its state of mind when a pair of rockets slammed into it. A couple of seconds later, the slight rain of animal fragments came to an end.

Well, that was one effective way of killing the things. As long as the supply of rockets held out. But the animal had managed to kill the mood. And so, Lenkin decided it was probably time to move on.

With the river emerging from a ravine, and a very narrow ravine at that, and trees blocking pretty much every alternative, the only way onwards appeared to be to continue following the trail, as it turned left and shadowed the cliff. Keeping both eyes on the track this

time, corporal Lenkin put his foot back on the accelerator and slowly set the vehicle in motion.

###

The next couple of hours dissolved almost into a single blur. The team followed the track as it clung to the base of the cliff, gradually moving further from the river. Eventually, it turned right, scaling the rocks with the aid of an ominously regular switchback. As they reached the top, they were treated to another vista of woods and mountains, the latter somewhat close for comfort, considering the small flock of drones clearly visible. The little machines were patrolling the high slopes and precipices around another facility - this one sitting near the summit of the closest peak, its three towers and central flipped amphora all thrusting for the heavens.

And then, it was back into the woods for more monotony, as they continued a north-easterly direction, searching for a mythical lake the Pelicans had supposedly spotted. As for just where it was... bit of a large thing to lose, a lake.

The trail slowly curved back westward. Gradually, the sound of rushing water became audible through the trees, along with something else. Something...mechanical sounding. And then, abruptly, the woods came to an end. It was a good thing Lenkin was paying attention this time, because it wasn't a wall of rock the Warthog would slam into. Actually, it wouldn't slam into anything, but it would suddenly plunge twenty metres into a raging torrent, the river stampeding along an artificial gorge. Every hundred metres or so it charged through a set of turbine blades - although the generators appeared to be elsewhere, going by the heavy duty chains and cogwheel systems linking each turbine to the ravine wall.

The track turned a full ninety degrees left, and followed the edge of the gully. Generously - or not so, considering the pad to the left of the trail that appeared to hold dormant drones - Lenkin paused for a moment to let Carther's Warthog go first. Carther's driver took the bait.

"That's right," she jeered as the LRV passed by, "Let someone without chronic lethargy take the- oh SUGAR!"

Now it was her turn to slam on the brakes, stopping the vehicle - and Carther's chuckling - cold. The four marines of the new lead Warthog stared at the drones they'd finally noticed in shock... until it dawned on them that the inactive machines were just that - inactive. One of them started chuckling nervously, as Carther turned and yelled.

"OKAY, I GET IT! YOU'VE MADE IT YOUR LIFE'S MISSION TO HUMILIATE US! SATISFIED YE-"

Something roared overhead, causing Carther to finish his sentence prematurely and hit the deck. Lenkin looked up, just in time to see a low flying aircraft disappear behind the trees to the north. That brief glimpse gave him two characteristics of the craft - a roughly cuboidal fuselage, and a top mounted delta wing setup. Enough to tell him it was some form of atmospheric fighter, but little else. Apart from its size - if the thing was carrying a pilot, he must have been

a midget - the whole affair was only about a third of the size of a Warthog, and that was including the wings.

The rumbling noise of its engines gradually faded away as it continued north, completely ignoring the insignificant human scout team. A similar noise could just be heard off to the northeast, so it seemed there was more than one of the craft lurking around. The question was; who did they belong to? They seemed to be completely different in aesthetics from the standard Forerunner tech, and they hadn't been UNSC or Covenant, so...

Lenkin drove up to meet the other Warthog and exchanged glances with Carther.

"Shall we just agree to put aside this bickering for now?" the other said, "I've got a feeling that that was significant."

"Agreed." responded Lenkin. Someone gave a sigh of relief.

###

A little further upriver, and Scout team Charlie found something else unexpected. All eight marines agreed that it was the best discovery of the day. And something so simple too! It came along the southern edge of the lake, which they had finally blundered into, crossed a bridge over the river, and continued on up the western shore, heading for the mountains.

And, if you're still wondering what it is, the new discovery was a road. Hardly anything you'd normally jump for joy on seeing, but if you've been sitting in a Warthog, being jolted all day...

The marines took the opportunity to take a short break from the endless travelling. Lenkin hopped out onto the asphalt - or whatever it was, but it certainly looked like asphalt - and headed towards Warthog B. Carther met him half way, the faintly swarthy marine dragging a small container with him.

"Well, which way from here?" he asked. Lenkin looked around. The sun was climbing towards its zenith, about a couple of hours from midday if his guess was right. That twenty hour day was going to cause no end of problems. The lake stretched off into the distance, several miles long he guessed. There were a few small islands, one near the northern shore the site of another anomalous structure. On the southern shore, a vast gleaming dome loomed. It seemed to emanate a general feeling of wrongness; Lenkin was sure something dangerous was held within. He was about to suggest it as their next destination, when something else caught his eye.

A pillar of smoke climbed into the sky, behind the mountains to the north. In the distance, something else was moving, receding along the road in roughly the same direction. The way the blur was tearing along just screamed trouble.

"What's that?" Carther asked, pointing at the smoke, "An industrial complex?"

"No idea. Might be worth checking out though." The mystery vehicle had vanished from sight by now, charging headlong into a mountain and vanishing. It piqued his interest, but maybe he should leave the

decision to someone in a position of authority.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Hold on..." Carther replied, bending to open the container at his feet. He reached in and removed a small, spherical object, and attached it to a harness mounting tiny propellers. Finally, he inserted the end of a long, lightweight wire into the sphere's base. A final check, a single button depressed on the small control pad built into the container, and the drone took off. Lenkin watched it rapidly gain altitude, the dangling wire preventing the higher altitude wind from yanking it away. And serving as a conduit to transfer signals between the communications drone and the storage container.

"Here ya go!" said Carther cheerfully, handing a small radio headset to Lenkin, already plugged into the base of the container. The cheer the other team leader was feeling probably came from the fact that he wasn't the one who would be personally reporting in. Lenkin sighed, and swapped his incompatible helmet for the headset. Carther hit another switch, and the headset emitted a bing as it connected to the radio frequency being used by Alpha base. Lenkin waited a moment, and started talking.

"This is Scout team Charlie reporting in. Alpha base, are you receiving me?"

"Alpha base, confirming connection. Anything we can do for you?"

"Corporal Joseph Lenkin reporting in as requested. We have arrived at the lake, but have multiple possible destinations from here. Requesting advice."

A new voice came on, one every member of the Spirit's personnel knew.

"This is Captain Cutter. Make your report, Corporal Lenkin."

Oh, shoot. The big cheese himself.

"Yes Sir. We have reached the lake and can see three main possibilities for close investigation. Two of them are more facilities, but the third isn't itself visible. We think it may be an industrial centre, there's one monster of a smoke plume coming from it. With your permission, we think this might be the best target for today's mission."

"Agreed. From what the Master Chief told us, the facilities don't tend to be a threat until disturbed. Meanwhile, we need to learn of the capabilities of the local defenders. If it is an industrial installation you can see, we'll need to analyse its potential. Permission granted. Is there anything else to report?"

"Well, we spotted Red team on our way up here, they're about three miles upriver from you. From the looks of things, you may have an intact Dire Thorn specimen to study when they get back. We've also located another two facilities on top of the two we can see from here, one of which appears to be a hydro electricity generator. And we've also seen some form of aircraft, but it vanished before we

could get a good look. That's about it, no hostile action taken against us, other than a single Thorn. No casualties."

"Very well. Proceed as you feel best, but remain alert. Don't get into any unnecessary trouble, don't pick a fight with any Sentinels."

"Sentinels, sir?"

"The Forerunner drones we've had more than enough experience with. The Master Chief finally informed us what they're called this morning. And apparently there are larger security machines floating around, so choose your actions carefully. We can't afford to lose any of you, and an air team may not reach you in time. Good luck."

"Acknowledged, captain!"

The connection was closed from the other end. Carther immediately recalled the drone, and quickly and efficiently packed it away. Lenkin sighed.

"Well, that was easy enough."

"Well, when we've got him for a CO, what do you expect? Now, the important question: who's leading this time?"

###

#####Into the Valley of Death...#####

On the move again, Scout team Charlie cautiously advanced up along the road, heading north. There was little movement beyond the waves lapping gently against the low shoreline, the distant trees swaying in the faint breeze and the odd drone "sorry, Sentinel, that came for a look. None of these made any movements that looked threatening however, and the small machines quickly found something more interesting to do. As for the circling specks overhead, (the native eagle analogue it seemed or possibly the local vulture) they tended to stick around for longer.

No doubt they were mentally gauging what these strange, fragile looking creatures tasted like

As the road rounded the north-west corner of the lake, it bumped against another river, this one emerging from a ravine cutting through a ridge between two mountains up north. Here, the road divided. One route onwards continued to follow the shoreline, while the other, determined to be different, turned north and followed the river. Almost without thinking, Lenkin turned left to follow the river. Well, it was the road heading in roughly the direction they wanted to go in, and the lakeside route didn't look like it would turn north anytime soon. Plus, the latter looked just plain boring.

It was only when they'd passed the junction by a fair distance, that Lenkin realised he'd missed something. Another vehicle had turned this way recently as well, going by the long skid marks sweeping across the road, mute evidence that something had made the turn. At speed. And with the other Warthog trailing again, that left only one

known candidate to lay the blame on. Still, Lenkin wasn't worrying. The mystery vehicle he'd spotted earlier had, after all, been speeding _away_ from them.

The ravine was looming ahead, river and road shadowing each other through its base. In its last moments of freedom, the road crossed the turbulent waters on a single span and plunged between the walls of rock. Abruptly, the noise level skyrocketed as echoes from the river " and more noticeably the Warthog engines, assailed the team from all sides. By mutual consent, Lenkin slowed to a crawl.

Ahead, the ravine narrowed, high, craggy cliffs cutting off all sight of the sun. Ambient light, reflecting and rebounding down the walls meant that everyone could still see, but it was still somewhat gloomy down here. But that wasn't what concerned him the most.

Carther's Warthog pulled up alongside and matched speed. Unable to hear each other over the storm of noise, the two team leaders exchanged thoughts using wildly exaggerated sign language and hand gestures. It translated roughly as this:

Carther - There's the welcoming committee. (He gestured at the large number of oddly shaped turrets and weapons emplacements dotting the ravine walls) Should we turn back and try the other road?

Lenkin - What, take the cowards way out? The Sentinels haven't been hostile, so I doubt these are. Besides, the other road would take all day.

Carther - I say better late than never. Didn't the captain say not to go looking for trouble?

Lenkin - We're marines, finding trouble was part of the job description. And personally, I'd rather run this risk, than attempt to get back through that Thorn infested forest in the _dark_.

Carther went still for a moment, obviously chewing over _that_ rather unsavoury prospect. He didn't take long to reject it out of disgust.

Carther - All right, you win this round. But the first sign of trouble, and we bug out, understood?

Lenkin - Perfectly.

The two Warthogs set off again, keeping side by side as they advanced cautiously up the treacherous leaking road. It _was_ wide enough for them to stay abreast, but only just. Lenkin wasn't happy with the raging torrent half a metre from his Warthog's left side wheels, but he also doubted the marine riding shotgun in Carther's vehicle was enjoying having the cliff face threatening to gouge his face off. Then the road crossed to the other side of the ravine, and the problems were reversed. Still, the numerous emplacements hadn't opened up yet, so at least only the environment was trying to kill them" so far.

The ravine twisted around to the left, cutting the entrance from view. A number of portals in the rocky walls became visible further on, each one disgorging a fair few Sentinels. Once again though, they

weren't bothered with Scout team Charlie, all of them bound for some destination further on. Still, the team advanced at its sluggish, cautious pace. And, as a result, a new sound became audible over the background cacophony. One that was unmistakeable.

Gunfire.

Lenkin stopped again, looking at Carther as the other Warthog crawled past. Carther made a gesture that somehow conveyed his meaning perfectly, despite it not appearing in any known form of sign language. It basically went; I know, I hear, but I'm not stopping. Sighing, Lenkin resumed speed and settled back into formation.

As the next bend approached, this one to the right, the gunfire became easier to distinguish. And it became clear that it wasn't UNSC weaponry. No human machine gun came with a distinct whirring sound when operated " at least, none the regular military used. Not to mention that only the Warthog LAAG's could sustain a severe bullet storm for this long, and all of them were accounted for.

100 metres, the distance before the next bend. Now more weapons could be heard, explosions, the soft hiss of Sentinel beams, the shriek of descending projectiles. Whatever it was causing all the commotion up front, it was raising more than seven kinds of hell. Additional Sentinels were passing overhead, moving to reinforce their beleaguered fellows. Larger machines were accompanying them, presumably the "bigger ones" the captain had mentioned. But as another addition to the pantheon of sound " a loud sonic boom " had just materialised, Lenkin didn't care much for their chances. And now

The Warthogs finally inched around the bend. And halted, where it was fairly safe. In front, the ravine widened temporarily, a large, round, sheer sided depression bored into the heart of the ridge. The ravine disappeared as it passed under the metal decking that covered the entire floor of the cavity. Sentinels swarmed above the ground, all firing at a single corner of the vast space. And standing there, were the unknowns. No, they weren't UNSC.

Four small walking tanks, all blasting Sentinels left, right and centre. Every one standing firm on four sturdy legs, four constant streams of bullets emanating from each. Clearly, the rule of four was standing in for the rule of three. All these Sentinels, all these beams sweeping across the four mecha, and which side was winning? Considering the Sentinels were dying like flies? The yellowy gold armour on those machines was incredible " as the Sentinel beams touched them, they glowed " and nothing more. And with fewer and fewer Sentinels inbound, it was pretty clear which side was going to win.

Unless of course, the Sentinels bigger brothers had something to say, as they cruised inwards.

Uh, no, they didn't. A small tube like armament on the side of one of the mecha was suddenly the source of a very fast moving plasma projectile that tore straight through one of the machines, shields and all, all accompanied by a sonic boom. The mech was immediately engulfed in a cloud of steam, as heat dissipation systems kicked in. Another one of the mechs took out the other juggernaut drone.

Oh, and the most amazing thing about these machines? They were only about a metre and a half long!

Lenkin's attention was distracted by Carther, gesturing wildly. They commenced sign language for a moment, until they both realised "simultaneously" that the ambient sound level was somehow slightly lower here. Lenkin didn't quite understand why "maybe the lack of raging water through the cavity or fewer echoes" but the reason didn't really matter. Especially if it meant he could drop the unwieldy hand waving for the less energy intensive helmet comm. gear.

"WHAT WAS THAT?" he shouted into his mike.

"I SAID, WHO DO YOU RECKON THEY ARE?" Carther's voice screamed back at him. "AND, BEFORE YOU ANSWER, DO YOU REALLY WANT TO KEEP THIS EAR FOR AN EAR VOLUME?"

No, he didn't. Lenkin was about to answer, when one of the mystery mechs launched a missile which failed to live up to its name. The unexpectedly large explosion knocked out a good third of the remaining Sentinels, so the battle was probably going to be over soon. Especially as the drones had stopped arriving. He took a moment to resume the conversation, quieter this time.

"I honestly have no idea. I'd say they were AI controlled though "too small to be piloted."

"So, what? UNSC AI's that we're unaware of, perfectly possible if that SPARTAN was telling the truth about how long we were in transit, Forerunner civil war, or something completely different?"

Lenkin weighed the possibilities. It didn't take very long.

"Well, according to my helmet's HUD, they aren't UNSC "no transponder. They look completely different to the Sentinels, which means they're most likely something new. Hopefully on our side."

"That'd be my vote. They are attacking Sentinels."

"Uh, were, Carther."

"What?"

Carther turned his head back up front. And did a double take. There wasn't much left to see. The four mini mecha were the only things still operational, surrounded by the burning carcasses of innumerable Forerunner drones. The battle had been absolute carnage, and yet the victors had somehow come through unblemished. Just what were they made of?

One of them turned slightly, looked straight at the disbelieving humans.

"SHIT!" screamed Samantha, as she dived off the back of the Warthog and into a handy alcove in the cliff face. Lenkin agreed with her, but couldn't gather the courage to move. Neither could anyone else. He closed his eyes, willing the end to be quick.

It wasn't. The seconds crept by, and Lenkin's "life flashing before his eyes" started to loop. Still nothing. Until, just as he was experiencing the third rerun of his first kiss, he became vaguely aware of a pervasive rumbling sound. With still no symptoms of an imminent demise, he finally gave up and opened his eyes. Someone else just beat him to it, going by the "whoah" that came wafting over the comm. while his own eyes were still adjusting to previously non-existent, blue flares of light.

For the most part, things hadn't changed much since he'd stopped looking. The wrecked Sentinels still littered the ground, as did the spent shells from the goodness knew how many magazines the mechs had shot off. The cliffs were still pitted and scored from all the stray fire. Greasy black smoke still curled across the arena, entwined around the legs of the machine continuing to look at them in an inexplicably threatening way.

So far, little difference to earlier. But, one thing that had changed, was the number of mechs. There was just one now. Replacing the others, three small, hovering aircraft, held aloft by a quartet of underbelly thrusters. These were the source of the bright blue glares trying " with some success " to give Lenkin a migraine. Shape wise, they looked remarkably similar to the mech below " just with wings and a tail instead of legs. A moment later, Lenkin found out why

The last remaining mech, finally bored with intimidating the squishy humans, blasted skywards on pillars of light emanating from each of its stubby legs. Then, in one smooth motion, it somehow retracted the limbs almost entirely into the main body, and released its own delta wings. The tail followed a moment later, rotating out of the fuselage. And then, there were no mechs, and four " well, assault fighters " assuming they still had use of their heavy armament in this form. With a jolt, Lenkin realised they were the same fighter type as the one that had passed overhead earlier that day.

But he still had no idea what their allegiance was. Nor was he going to find out, because at that moment they opened up their main thrusters and aimed for the sky. With almost effortless ease, they flipped over the rim of the arena, and were lost from view.

And now, silence. Samantha sheepishly emerged from her hiding place, and resumed her position in the back. No one commented at first, all mentally reviewing what they had just seen. But they couldn't keep quiet forever

"Someone mind telling me what that was all about?" asked Carthers driver.

"Not a clue miss. Someone isn't looking to be visitor of the month, but that's all I could gather."

"Huh, understatement of the millennia, Carl. Jitters, we should haul ass out of here."

"Sorry corporal, why?"

"Why do you think, shite for brains? When whoever's in charge of those Sentinels learns about this bullshit, you think they're going to just ignore it? No, they're going to flood us out till we can't

piss without hitting one."

"Corporal, watch your language. You may have a point, but--"

"Yes, she does have a point, Corporal Lenkin! Hostiles, six O'clock!"

At Drane's sudden interruption, every one whipped their heads around. A couple of "ouch's" echoed around as some took the motion too far, too fast. But that pain was nothing compared to the sight of the large machine that had somehow crept up behind them.

It floated closer, energy shields crackling online.

"Shall I give him a taste of the can opener, Sir?" called Drane, raising his rocket launcher.

"NO!" shouted Lenkin, "Not until it opens fire!"

"Are you INSANE, Jitters? Do you want us to get nuked?"

Samantha's comment got a few mumbles of agreement, but Lenkin wasn't having any of it. He wasn't going to be the one to order the start of a skirmish. Especially not with the other hundred or so Sentinels emerging over the ravine walls and heading downwards. Those mechs may have got off with nary a scratch, but they had had armour.

The machine was now a few metres away from the rear bunker. Lenkin heard the click of multiple safety catches being flicked off. He didn't bother complaining this time, he had survival instincts too. But hopefully they wouldn't take the logical next step, and actually shootâ€|

They didn't. But Carther's team did! An M19 launched rocket slammed into the side of the drone, quickly followed by another. Before the automaton had even hit the ground, the rat-tat-ta of Carther's LAAG filled the air, the Sentinel swarm the target.

And all hell broke looseâ€|

Carther's driver stomped on the gas, as the marines in Lenkin's team joined the fight. The other Warthog shot forward, narrowly dodging an orange beam slicing through the space just vacated. Another beam flashed into life, scorching tarmac as it swept towards them. Cursing, Lenkin jolted his own Warthog into life.

The next moment, the two beams were joined by fifty more. Glancing back, the only analogy Lenkin could think of, was a huge spider web of fire, covering the entire ravine. There were precious few gaps he could see to escape through, which left two options. Keep heading north and find another way back, or somehow trick the vengeful machines. The latter sounded the most difficult, butâ€|

"Carther!" he shouted into his mike, as the two vehicles bounced into the vast cavity. "We need to turn around!"

"What? Have you looked back there?"

"Just did. You notice any weakness in their attack patterns?"

A minor pause.

"Oh, I get ya. Fine, what the hell. But if we end up down below for this, the devil will be nothing compared to what I'll do to ya."

A moment later, Carther's Hog turned left and started on a long curve around the cavity wall. Lenkin did the same, only to the right.

The two Warthogs screamed apart, each one the focus of roughly half the Sentinels. They reacted fast, he'd give them that. And they were staggering fire too, half trying their hardest to sizzle some flesh, the other half recharging. But, as Lenkin and Carther had spotted, there was a tiny flaw in their targeting programsâ€¦

The two human vehicles had now turned a full 180, and were storming straight back for the southern exit. The Sentinel beams followed them. And that was their weakness, they always followed. The Forerunner machines on the shield world had been smarter, they'd occasionally fired in front and swept back. But these machines? Nope, they always fired behind and thus were appalling at catching a moving target.

Carther's Warthog jolted back onto the ravine road, slowing down slightly as it did so. Lenkin too dropped a gear, unwilling to splash into the river in his attempts to dodge the Sentinels. But of course, that meant the beams behind started to get closer. And with the turrets above humming into life, adding their own beams to the mix, things were getting more serious than everâ€¦

###

SOLAR WIND TO ESPADA AND RIGEL.

FANCY CLEARING UP YOUR MESS?

###

Continuing down the ravine, the Warthogs thundered past a slight waterfall that hadn't been there before, and rounded the first bend. Ahead of them, Sentinels aplenty spilling from the portals above. A trio of shielded nasties up above began to rain mortar fire down on the fleeing vehicles. A fourth began to descend, seeking to block the road with its bulk.

"Oh no you DON'T!" shouted Carl, standing up and loosing both loaded rockets at once. One missed, tearing a fair sized hole in the ravine wall, but the other impacted dead on. The machine's shielding turned red, but held firm. It responded with a storm of pulse laser beams, missed with a good quantity, butâ€¦

"AHHHH!" screamed Carl, falling back into his seat, a large hole burnt into his shoulder. His eyes glazed over, as he fumbled clumsily for a med pack with his other hand.

"BASTARD!" cried Samantha, directing her LAAG fire at the machine. The shields flickered, and went out. Another rocket, this one launcher from Carther's team, finished the job. The stricken drone plunged into the raging river and vanished from view.

Impossibly, the number of beams suddenly got even greater. Worse, a

few of the deadlier blue beams had entered the mix. Despite the fair number of kills to their tally, the situation was very rapidly turning against the beleaguered marines. A scream from Carther's vehicle, only sought to emphasise this.

"_JITTERS, SPEED UP_"

"_I can't! Any faster and we'll be swimming!_"

"_If you don't, we'll be a bleeding cooked dinner for the next bastard Thorn to wander this way!_"

There wasn't time to answer that one, because a second scream from the other vehicle signalled the loss of the shotgun marine. A stray mortar had exploded above, blowing the vehicle sideways. The driver had managed to wrestle the steering wheel back on course, but the poor fool next to her hadn't been able to stop himself being thrown out. His tumbling, ragdoll-esque form was a shocking sight, even more so when Lenkin's Hog rolled straight over him. Lenkin felt the bile rising, and tried to convince himself that the man had already been dead, killed by impact with the road surface. He wasn't entirely successful.

Three marines out of action, five to go. At this rateâ€¦ He tried to shove the thought out of his head, as the next bend approached. The two vehicles charged round it, out of the kill zone of the vast majority of the Sentinels and turretsâ€¦

And the brakes shrieked as both drivers spotted the latest juggernaut drone sitting on the bridge dead ahead.

Everyone screamed, knowing that this time, they were finished. The drone began to audibly power up its pulse beam emitters, the Sentinels behind rounded the bend, andâ€¦

A roar of powerful engines above. The sound of a descending missile. And the sudden noise of hundreds of Sentinels crashing to the ground. Lenkin's HUD went dead.

Silence once again reigned supreme. Well, almost. The marine next to Lenkin was still whimpering, the river was still roaring, and the noise of engines was still present above. Lenkin looked up, catching a brief glimpse of a retreating mech. fighter.

It had saved them? But why? And for that matter, how?

Carther's voice called from up front.

"Lenkin, you still there? Comm.'s and HUD's are down, must be EMP. That would explain what knocked the Sentinels out."

"We're here. We got a few injuries, butâ€¦ no fatalities."

It was a while before Carther responded.

"Weâ€¦ lost Kingsleyâ€¦"

Lenkin couldn't think of a suitable response, not this time. All those men and women he'd seen killed before his eyes, and there was still nothing he could say that would make everything seem better,

seem like the deaths had been something other than _needless_. Samantha's "Damn it!" was appropriate, but wouldn't, _couldn't_ lessen the pain.

Carther finally continued.

"We'd betterâ€¦ get back to base. We need toâ€¦ report what we've seen."

He waited a moment for Lenkin to acknowledge, then gave up.

"Lenkinâ€¦ Josephâ€¦ We'll find a way. Some day, we'll discover the true worth of this information. Kingsley shall not have died in vainâ€¦"

He gestured to his driver, getting his Warthog moving again. Slowly, Lenkin moved to followâ€¦

#####

Authors notes:

Sheesh, for something that I still very much want to do, this took an awfully long time to finish. Well, like I said last time, I've just started university. And University's welcome gift was to drop three assignments on us _IN THE FIRST WEEK_! Ouch! So, for now, I'm expecting to update once a month. On the plus side, these chapters are getting longer, so at least it should be a fair amount each time. To a given definition of "fair".

I forgot to answer a query last time regarding the timeframe that this story takes place in. For the record, the year is 2556; four years after the business on the Ark, and twenty five years after the _Spirit of Fire_ left the shield world.

Sorry if the swearing is a little unrealistic. I don't swear myself, so I have little experience with such matters. If you'd like, drop me a message/review, tell me to cut back on it, and I'll reduce it from here on. At any rate, only Samantha Gordez will be engaging in any real amount of it.

The mecha have a fairly large role to play, but not the biggest. They may sound invincible at this stage, but they aren't. They'll soon start taking damage. Now, the real questions regarding them would be, who do they work for, what are their goals?

I know the logistics overview was split up between this chapter and the last, but I decided that covering it all at once would be boring for readers, and would probably send you to sleep.

And finally, the reasoning behind the "Genetics" title may not be apparent yet. Don't worry, it will soon. Probably in Phase 6.

Thanks for reading, please review!

Next Phase: Alchemy in Motion

4. Phase 4: Alchemy in Motion

****Halo: Genetics****

****Glossary and Conversions****

Kelvin: An alternate measurement of temperature to Celsius and Fahrenheit. To convert Kelvin to Celcius, simply minus 273.

Facts about the Kelvin method. 0 Kelvin is equivalent to minus 273 degrees Celcius, also known as absolute zero. You can not get colder than this, there is no thermal energy whatsoever at this temperature. As such, you can not have a minus reading when dealing with Kelvin.

Bobby: This can refer to many things, including birds â€" but the use in this chapter is slang for an English policeman. As for the "joke", I'll explain that at the bottom.

Disclaimer: Right, I'm already fed up of doing disclaimers covering the entire cast of O.C.s every chapter, so from here on they'll only contain characters relevant to that specific chapter. So, in this chapterâ€|

Most named marines here are mine (but NOT Sergeant Forge), as is the Unggoy Patab. A certain singing entity is also one of mine, as are the golden mecha, but pretty much everything else is the property of 343 Industries. I may have created this specific plot, but they hold the rights to the universe. Pityâ€|

****Phase 4: Alchemy in Motion****

Archon â€" Sector 16 airspace

The noon sky above Archon's pristine wilderness is a calm one. Few clouds exist to mar the sky, no pollution to speak of, no gales howling awayâ€| and no inexplicable "rain from a clear sky". Just a few slight breezes and thermals to stir the tepid air. Clearly, something is upâ€| oops, bad pun there!

The indigenous bird soaring through the sky is oblivious to all this. Coerced onwards by thoughts alien to its simple mind, the eagle analogue wouldn't recognise "unnatural" if it flopped dead in front and waved the "FOOD!" flag.

â€|

The riven will slumbers deep, waiting for one to end its sleepâ€|

...

The bird skims across a vast lake, wings briefly dipping in a shower of spray, and looks down. There is a hint of shadows beneath the still waters. The bird isn't concerned, but it isn't clear whether it knows that there is no threatâ€| or is just too stupid to worryâ€|

â€|Funny things, avians. This one certainly is. Like the Dire Thorns below, it is a great deal bigger than a bird should be. It has wingtip feathers with a razor edge, a beak which almost drools a mild

venom. And that's saying nothing of the volume at which it can screechâ€|

The bird soars higher, rising on thermals above a shining dome. It re-orientates, turns to the south east, and glides ever onwards.

â€|Have you wondered what the Forerunners were truly capable of? More than you could imagine. But even they had limits, had failings. The Flood brought them down low, wiped them out. And they had brought it upon themselvesâ€|

â€|

The riven will stir from its slumber, time may pass, yet all remains sunderedâ€|

â€|

The bird dips lower, almost playfully skimming around a trio of beaks breaking the water's surfaceâ€|

â€|No one knows if any Forerunners survived the apocalypse, as the Maginot sphere broke and the Flood swarmed in. Mendicant Bias and Offensive Bias clashed, and the galaxy's fate was decided. But not in the heat of conflict, but as the final optionâ€| the Halo arrayâ€| was firedâ€|

â€|

The riven will spasm, its memories come, a supernova in its dreamsâ€| a burning sunâ€|

â€|

The bird reaches the low shore, speeds across a narrow strip of grey, and skims into a forest. In actions that would be suicide for any Terran bird of prey, the avian zigzags through the trees, ignoring all as it continues ever onwards.

â€|The Forerunners are gone, but their legacy remains. Scattered across the galaxy, the relics of their once proud civilisation. A number of Halo rings, shield worlds, information repositories andâ€| other facilitiesâ€| And their custodians are not without resources, or goalsâ€|

â€|

The riven will calm, safe in knowledge, unaware of existenceâ€| on the knife's edgeâ€|

â€|

A clearing passes below, the bird glimpses something large. A group of three strange beings react, bullets flying up. But by then the bird is gone, the wheeled vehicle and the mechs left alone in the woods.

â€|But even with the re-emergence of humans from their backwater world, are the watching eyes truly aware of the importance of these

beings? Are they pests, interfering with all divine purpose of the creators, or something more important?

“And what else could be lurking out there, hidden in the deepest depths of darkest space? What takes precedence, the demon you know, or the devil you don't?

“

The riven will awakens, bathed in light, the clipped wings flap with forbidden flight“

“

Safeguards are there for a reason. You never truly know when or how something will go off the rails. But it will, sooner rather than later. You can only hope that you aren't still around when the train wreck happens“

The bird bursts from the trees, and begins to gain height again. Flapping its wings, it soars across the grassy plain towards the river. Ahead, a lone fortified encampment, nestled between two placid ribbons of water. The bird begins to circle, looks down, and shrieks“

“

The riven will speaks, a voice echoes round, a single question to the dormant ground“

“

"Is it“ time?"

###

Archon “ Sector 16, Alpha Base

"R_haaaaAEEEEEEe!__"__

Private "friend to all living creatures" George du Pluiess was perhaps the only one who didn't jump at the sound of the bird overhead. He sauntered, not a care in the world, through the organised chaos of a still incomplete Alpha Base, heading in the general direction of the command tent. More precisely, he was heading for the small tent where a certain unwanted guest was being held. But unlike the other marines who should also have been preparing to take over guard duties around about now, George didn't mind a bit. Unlike them, he quite enjoyed the idea of being able to have a close look at a Grunt, without it shooting at him.

Many of his friends couldn't understand why he'd joined the corps in the first place. When you considered his aversion to killing things, you did have to wonder“

The truth of the matter was almost fridge logic. The somewhat idealist young man liked his animals, not to mention the birds and the bees. Now, what would happen if the Covenant came to Earth, and glassed it? That's right, George du Pluiess was fighting this war for conservation! If the Covenant were so smart, they could change

their plans appropriately. Humans? Bastards, you can have em. But just you harm one hair on a tiger's head, just one feather on a pigeon's wing, andâ€¦

A familiar figure passing drew his attention. Professor Ellen Anders strolled by, heading for the Warthog "yard". George paused, following her with his eyes, completely missing the short, shambling figure and its escorting marine quartet in the process. Understandable, most of the other marines â€" well, the male ones at least â€" would have been similarly distracted. So far, no one â€" bar a single fool â€" had managed to work up the courage to ask the good professor out. But, taking into account some of the tales running rings around the mess tent, that may have been a good thing.

â€¦Actually, half of the division had somehow become convinced that any advances not 100% carefully planned and well intentioned, would result in a long term haunting â€" courtesy of the ghost of Sergeant Forge. With that cheerful thought lurking over them, was it any wonder there was a surplus of spineless cowards around?

Anders had finally left George's field of vision. Sighing, he ducked round the side of the tent holding captured enemy weaponry, and continued the short remainder of the way to his destination. Even before he'd arrived, he could tell something was amiss. Private Johanne Melchos, and the always cranky acting lieutenant Silas Falgarn were standing next to the impromptu prison tent, an even more extreme look of fury than usual on the latter's face. George sped up.

"Something the matter, lieutenant?" he asked, crossing the last few metres between them. Before his superior opened his mouth, he was already regretting his choice of words.

"Something the bloody matter? You're damn right there is! When I get my hands on thatâ€¦ that woman, she'll be lucky if any part of her backside survives to be chewed out by the captain!"

What a lovely image. The almost brutish lieutenant was noticeably spraying spittle with every syllable. Next to him, private Melchos was slowly inching away. George couldn't blame her, not with this level of vehemence.

"Slow down Sir. What happened?"

Falgarn stared at him, seemingly astounded that his subordinate didn't know. Then his sluggish brain caught up, and reminded him that George had only just arrived. Then he turned on the spot, pulled open the flap covering the tent entrance, and gestured.

"See for yourself. Notice anythingâ€¦ missing?"

George did indeed. The tent was noticeably devoid of occupants. No marinesâ€¦ and no Grunt. He backed out, and promptly got deafened by another outburst, a mere ten centimetres from his ear.

"I tell you, the captain won't be able to protect her this time. I'm not blaming her for that mess on the last planet â€" although she was

stupid enough to get herself captured " but she seems to be the root cause of every problem that comes our way! She blimbling well never follows regulations, always does her own thing, drags us from one mess to the next with no consideration for how we feel about it!"

George switched off at that point. Melchos had quietly opened the gap to half a tent's length, but had stalled in her escape attempt. Probably realised that any further will make it too obvious, she knows that it would make her the target of his next rant. Lieutenant Falgarn was like that, ranting was his official hobby. In this case, he had a point, but George couldn't accept that a certain rebuttal from the person in question wasn't at least partly to blame. Assuming he had the right lady in mind!

Eventually Falgarn calmed down, and George saw his opportunity to get confirmation.

"So who was responsible?" he asked. A recipe for instant explosion, that query.

"WHAT? Haven't you been listening to me? Bleeping Anders, that's who! I arrive here, ten minutes early I might add, and what do I find? An empty tent, that's what! It seems, just before I got here, Anders took it into her head to go for a walk, and take our prisoner with her! She had the marine guard detail as well, so NO ONE QUESTIONED HER! Now who knows where she's got to!"

George tried to respond to that one, but Falgarn wasn't giving an opening.

"And why did the Captain agree to assign her to guard duty? He must have known that she can't be trusted to stick to her orders, But of course, she had to re-interpret "Don't take your eyes off him" to "Go where you will, as long as he's with you"! Yeah sure, it's better than dealing with the paperwork for POW murder, but now I've got to explain this to the captain!"

Another brief pause, another failed attempt to reveal that Anders had been seen 5 minutes ago. This time, the interruption came in the form of a rather cheery sounding greeting from behind.

"Heya Sir, so how's this fine morning treating you then?"

George and Melchos gave Dean Algart " the last member of their little team " a sympathetic glance, as the lieutenant whirled and fed him a death glare!

###

#####_Did you hear something?#####_

Archon " Sector 16, Alchemist Facility

Still waiting at the base of the entrance ramp, the Chief was finally

starting to get bored. Even SPARTANS had their limits, and the Chief had done more than his fair share of waiting by this point. He'd even stopped flinching every time a Sentinel whirred out of an access hatch. To be fair, they weren't particularly interested in him; they looked, but seemed more concerned with herding around the flock of tiny maintenance drones that inevitably accompanied them. Constructors, Cortana had called them during one of her increasingly rare moments of surfacing from the system. How she'd dug up the term was beyond him, especially when he considered that she was supposed to be focussing on outwitting security.

Of course, he wasn't aware of Cortana meandering through the system, lazily snagging every little bit of information that looked interesting. He wasn't aware that she'd actually found a solution a while back, but was just letting him wait while she delved into the (admittedly limited) system library.

Nor was he aware of the battle currently taking place up north, of Scout team Charlie frantically racing to escape hundreds of insanely angry Sentinels. If he had been, he might have been suspicious of the local Sentinels and their apparently uninterested attitude. He wouldn't have been entirely unjustified eitherâ€|

Just as the latest Sentinel disappeared outside, following its own bunch of erratically moving Constructors, Cortana finally decided to give him some exercise.

"Here we go. Chief, we're in."

The security door groaned, split in the middle, and began to rumble into opposite walls. The Chief switched his flashlight on, and ducked quickly through the gap. The other side wasâ€| a bit of a disappointment to tell the truth. He'd had enough of security doors by this point, so he wasn't too impressed to find another one facing him. But there were a couple of smaller passageways heading off to either side, so things were better this time. Especially if the green lights at the centre of the triangular double doors meant the usual thing. He walked up to oneâ€|

â€|Yep, unlocked. Thank for goodness for that! Still, if the main door could be openedâ€|

"Don't even bother asking." stated Cortana, returning to her usual spot on board the MJOLNIR. "Different security protocols on that one, and I've spent enough time abusing the system thank you very much. Not to mention the vague hints of the other side being an "intentional outsider death trap".

Rolling his eyes slightly as he moved in to the bright passageway â€| switching his flashlight back off as he did so â€| the Chief deigned not to answer. His short time on Archon had already made him very wary of these strange surroundings. So "same old, same old", yet so filled with lurking disaster potential. When even the wildlife caused a SPARTAN trouble, you knew things were getting insane. It almost made him pine for the Floodâ€|

â€|Or not. Imagine what they could do with the Thorns. Sure, the Flood supposedly only went after "intelligent" life, but that Thorn had been acting very strangely for a "dumb" animal. Consistently attacking the hard target for one thing, and he was sure those eyes

had held a glimmer of somethingâ€¦ something more than base animal cunningâ€¦

He shook his head to clear the parade of uncomfortable images marching past his eyes, and concentrated on putting his feet somewhere other than in the alarmingly numerous puddles of gloop covering this section of the narrow passageway floor. Behind him, the door slid closed, cutting off all illumination as the corridor lights chose that moment to inexplicably go out! Caught by surprise, the Chief lost his balance, andâ€¦ SPLOSH!

"Ugh. Chief, mind where you're stepping!"

Switching on his flashlight again, the Chief stared down at his armoured left boot, now covered in silver gunk. A few seconds of calculated observation gave him the stunningly obvious conclusion â€" it wasn't corroding away his armour. So, it wasn't harmful to treated steel or titanium, and probably wouldn't touch the various composites further up, but he wasn't really willing to test whether it was similarly harmless to bare flesh. And there was something else bugging him about it, something obvious, somethingâ€¦ wait a minute!

"Cortanaâ€¦ is this stuff moving?"

"Huh, what? Sorry, I was just pondering a few things. You were saying?"

What was she distracted about now? It seemed every time he turned around lately, his AI companion was daydreaming. Maybe that was why she'd taken so long to get them in here, she wasn't usually that slow. Even the Halo Index shouldn't have made that much of a difference â€" how fast were AI's supposed to think again? Maybe the Gravemind had left some form of parting gift eating into her thought routinesâ€¦ But for now, he decided not to press the point.

"Thisâ€¦ liquid. Is it moving?" He switched up his visor's magnification so she could get a better look.

"Now that you mention it, yes, I believe so. And I don't think it's liquid."

The Chief looked closer at theâ€¦ whatever it was. No doubt about it now, the puddles were definitely slithering slowly around, diverging and reforming, their movement completely ignoring the subtle gradient of the passage floor. The gloop on his boot had all but abandoned ship, sliding over to the wall and, just to ram the point home, was now starting to climb it.

"Right," came Cortana's voice, "I've had a look into the local Forerunner database, and I think I know what we're dealing with here. Nanomites."

Much to the AI's surprise â€" the Chief sensed through the core processing chips attached to his brain â€" her SPARTAN didn't ask for clarification. He simply started moving further along the dark, flashlight only illuminated passageway. She made her annoyance quite clear.

"What, no "what are nanomites" question? Don't tell me you've heard

the term beforeâ€| how, when and where?"

"I haven't heard the term before. But it seems obvious enough. "Nano" means microscopic, "mites" usually means insects, but in this case I'd say machines."

â€|

"Well, I knew there was a brain in there, but when you spend most of your time shooting things, it does tend to slip one's mind."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. But I'm still giving you the lecture â€" got to get my "smug" fix one way or another."

"So, nanomites. You're absolutely right, they are microscopic machines. The Forerunners mostly used them for maintenance, but I did find a few references that indicate nanomite battles are also possible. It seems there are three base classes â€" Attacker and Defender mites on the military side, and Utility mites to handle machine maintenance. That's part of the reason the remnants of the Forerunner civilisation have survived this long."

The nanomite puddles had been left behind by now, which was a shame â€" the plumbing along this section of the corridor looked in dire need of a little patching. Then, right on cue, a lone Constructor fluttered out of nowhere, waltzed past the Chief's head, and started fixing the nearest hairline fissure with crackling green beam. Well, that was convenient, he thought, watching it move on to the next. Cortana was still talking.

"â€|Most likely the colonies back there were escapees â€" automatically clustering together for easy collection, but until something does come to pick them up, they just wander randomly, looking for Forerunner tech to fix. If I had enough time, I'd find a way to persuade some of them to take up residence in your armour, butâ€|"

Okay, now the Chief was starting to get fed up. The big problem with the MJOLNIR and the whole UNSC neural interface, was that there was no way of not hearing a passenger AI. He was just about to try the only method he knew to shut her up â€" i.e. thumping the side of his helmet, the same way he'd stopped her monologue after that teleportation incident on Alpha Halo â€" when something caught his attention. Something completely out of place in these dark passageways. Someone was singing.

"Fires in the night, burning bright, visible to all who have the sight."

Cortana caught it too.

"Wait, what is that?" she asked, a question that no-one else would ever think of asking. More of the "song" was echoing down the corridor, the voice being noticeablyâ€| odd sounding. Definitely not human, but the distortions arising from the constantly ricocheting sound waves made it impossible to make any other guesses.

"_One __by __one, __they __disappear, __nothing __to __see, __far __or __near_."

The Chief reached a junction, a slightly smaller passage leading off to the right. He paused and listened. For a moment, silence " then more verse wafted out of the side corridor. Clicking the safety on his assault rifle off, he cautiously swung round the corner and continued, trailing the bright circle his flashlight was throwing out.

"_Cracks __all __around, __from __sky __to __the __ground, __starships __fall __and __machines __will __bound_."

"What on Earth are they talking about?" wondered Cortana. The Chief didn't respond. It all sounded like gibberish to him.

"_Possible __to __mend? __Or __perhaps __the __end? __Maybe __the __universe __just __won__'__t __bend?_"

And that line sounded _even_ _worse_. Another junction materialised out of the gloom, a "Y" branch this time. Once again, the Chief listened, and this time" nothing. Another Constructor whirred out of the black, and paused. It swivelled around, seemingly lost itself, and then"

"_All __tied __to __one, __part __of __the __fun, __everyone __tied __to __the __will __of __the __gun_."

"Whoever " or _whatever_ is singing that " has some serious issues." Cortana commented as the Chief quickly started down the left branch. Almost immediately, he passed another junction lost in the shadows to the side, then checked himself and turned around as the voice spouted the latest gobbledegook from _behind_.

"_A __new __stage, __a __new __page, __the __deluded __wanderer__" goes __on __the__" __rampage?_"

A splash as the Chief surged through an inconveniently placed pool of water. He nearly missed the next line, spoken as it was at a far lower volume. It didn't seem to be a continuation of the sing song either.

"_Really_ Nocturne, what rubbish have you been putting into my mind _this_ time?"

Suddenly, the passage ended. With an _abyss_! The Chief, caught unawares, would have gone over the edge" but for the flimsiest excuse for a guard rail ever. Really, it would have been safer to have nothing at all! The only reason this buckling metal frame of tin foil hadn't given way under the SPARTANs half ton plus weight, was the cross bracing on every third post. _That_ gave up the ghost as _something_ crashed into his helmet from behind! Thankfully, the Chief had managed to recover enough of his balance by that point to whirl around, assault rifle at the ready, to come face to face with" a Constructor?

It _was_ a Constructor. The twin fuselage drone looked almost apologetic for a moment " nose slightly dipped, a low moaning sound coming from whatever Forerunner wizardry kept it airborne. Then, in one smooth burst of motion, it accelerated to some ridiculous speed,

neatly slid around the Chiefs helmet, and disappeared off into the gloom.

"If I didn't know there were millions of those things," mused Cortana, "_and_ that they _don_ ' _t_ have the processing power, I would have said that that one was following us. Nowâ€| where are we?"

The Chief looked around, but not at anything particularly interesting. This was because he couldn't actually see anything through the darkness, even with the dream team of SPARTAN augmented vision, MJOLNIR sensors and helmet flashlight on the case. Then Cortana turned the flashlight brightness up. Way upâ€|

Wincing at the sudden glare â€" not to mention mentally cursing â€" the Chief activated his helmet's brightness filters and looked around again. The light meandered across the huge, mostly empty room as he did so, trying its hardest to win what could only be a _losing_ battle against the flowing shadows. Never before had he been so aware that brighter light only leads to ever darker shadows, the contrast between the two flowing powers so clearâ€| and yet so subtle. For, at times like this, they had many similarities â€" both were blindingly obvious (literally in one's case), both could easily be said to obstruct important detailsâ€|

"Uh, Chief?"

â€|

"Come on soldier, less thinking, more looking!"

The Chief was starting to get a little fed up with Cortana's back seat driver tendencies. But he kept quiet and went back to looking around.

The narrow walkway hanging from the bare concrete like wall circled the room, the only safe ground for anything humanoid to settle on. Some distance below, metallic looking slime was gently churning away, the entire floor of the room covered to an uncertain depth. There were a few large openings in the wall below, a hint of long pipes stretching deeper into the facility. Beyond that, and another pair of exit doors, the only thing worth noting was the apparatus hanging from the ceiling, three narrow tubes drooping low enough to just dip into the anonymous slurry. Some sort of pumping mechanism was the Chief's guess. He looked down again.

"More nanomites? he asked.

"No, not this time. IR readings indicate a temperature of approximately 244 Kelvin, rather chilly in other words. Whatever it is, it's liquid, but that's as much as I can make out. I _would_ hack the net again, but there's no access in here. So, I guess we'll find out later. Now, which way from here?"

The flashlight flicked off, the increased output having drained the batteries. Now that brought back memories, of frantic battles against the Flood in near pitch black conditionsâ€| suddenly, the Chief wanted to get moving again. Without a torch, that could be very risky. Not that the batteries had run out before, but if the mk. VI MJOLNIR had the same charging system as the mk. V on backup, it

hopefully wouldn't be too long before it was available again.

But the Chief wanted to get moving _now_. Forerunner facility and Flood went hand in hand, and this was _not_ the best environment to engage them in. Or Sentinels for that matter. The singing had stopped some time back, which meant he was rather lacking in clues for which way to go—wait a sec! His eyes finally adjusted enough to the dark to notice a faint glow creeping through the faint cracks around the next door to the right. Even the lowest level flashlight would have rendered it invisible to the eye, so it just went to show that some light to come from even the darkest situations.

Moving very carefully, testing each step before committing his body weight to the groaning metal, the Chief inched his way around the wall. It took a while, but he eventually got to, and through the door. And, right on cue, his flashlight came back on!

"Before you badmouth... or bad_think_ technology," quipped Cortana in a deceptively pleasant manner, "remember who you're sharing the suit with!"

"Would I do that?"

"Come to think of it, no. You've always been the stoic, silent type... Wait, did you _really_ just say that? Since when do you talk anything other than business?"

The Chief almost grinned. It wasn't often he caught the AI off guard... hold on, that was strange for him as well. Maybe Cortana was starting to get to him, just as his fellow SPARTAN II, Maria 062, had been captured by family life... He quickly made a mental note to watch himself from now on. The prospect of that sort of change didn't exactly fill him with joy...

Right, where was he now? A fairly low and bumpy ceiling, the glow of lighting emanating from multiple depressions up there, but a long, wide room overall. A number of consoles positioned here and there, and a great deal of complicated looking machinery clogging up the corners. All sealed off with sheet glass, but there nonetheless. Through a gap in the far wall, a fair few storage bays were visible in a hangar sized space - all empty. Although if they _were_ storage bays, why all the paraphernalia on the walls? Why a grille for a floor? Another mystery to solve.

"Jackpot!" announced Cortana, moments before she vanished again. At this rate, the Chief would start charging her for lodgings; she was out more than in after all. But at least she'd had the decency to leave a comm. channel back to her transportation.

"Blimey, something really wasn't expecting a hostile intelligence to enter the mainframe from here. I mean, the outside security was ridiculous in its complexity, this is ridiculous for the reverse. Very sloppy to have a metaphorical wet paper bag guarding your facility's control centre."

Something was bothering the Chief as well. The room was well lit, but why was there a purple tinge near the centre? Surely not for any aesthetic reason? The uneven ceiling was _not_ helping, impeding his attempts to locate the cause as it was. He slowly stalked across the room, pausing to investigate each console as he passed. Still

nothing. Sure, the purple glow was only an anomaly, but the Chief didn't like anomalies. Such things had a way of suddenly proving very hazardous to one's health. The odd slithering sounds back in Alpha Halo's containment facility came to mind, although there had been fair there had other hints that not all had been well. Skittish, screaming Unggoy that hadn't even noticed him, that crashed Spirit dropship, the abandoned Shade turrets too. Here there was none of that, so he had to take every anomaly very seriously indeed.

He continued checking consoles, but couldn't understand the strange Forerunner glyphs cluttering up the displays. Sure, his instincts usually told him which button to press, which control to activate, but they couldn't do a thing in the translation department. And as for Cortana's help... what was she doing again?

By now, he'd reached the far side, and the gap looking out to the storage bays beyond. He counted eleven of them, set into three of the walls. Meanwhile, the last wall was occupied by another large bulkhead door. There was the typical access panel on the right hand side, maybe it would-

"How curious."

The Chief whirled around and brought up his assault rifle. Something behind him had spoken, and it hadn't been Cortana. Not unless she'd taken to speaking in a slightly mechanical, male voice.

"My predictions are 98% accurate. This discrepancy is..."

"Keep talking..." the Chief muttered (under his breath to avoid spooking the owner of the lurking voice), as he carefully advanced in the direction the voice was originating from. The purple glow started to become all the more noticeable.

"I wonder what the results of this test will be... but then, I already know!"

The Chief slowed as the source of the lighting issue became apparent. A regular, round hole in the ceiling. He inched the last couple of steps and...

"Still, the possibility intrigues me..."

...found himself staring straight in the glowing purple eye of a Forerunner Monitor, sitting comfortably just inside the rim of a transportation conduit. It didn't seem to mind that it had been discovered one bit.

"How curious..." it simply repeated, and promptly vanished deeper inside. The purple glow faded away to nothing.

The Chief stood perfectly still for a moment, unwilling to believe that the most important automaton on the planet had just upped and left. Didn't it even care that outsiders were prowling around one of its facilities? Or that an alien AI was running rampant through the local network? Surely it couldn't be that unconcerned about the prospect?

"Cortana," he asked, "Did you see that?"

"Did I see what, Chief?"

Apparently not. And before he could divulge this pretty important observation, she came up with other issues.

"Okay, I've just patched into the facility's network of security probes and cameras. Apart from you, we've got the odd Sentinel here and there, a single Enforcer guarding the power generators, a hive of Constructors zipping all over the place... and five unidentified _large_ heat signatures approaching the repli-gel vat we passed through to get in here. Fancy taking a look for me?"

The Chief didn't, at least not until he'd alerted her to the fact a Monitor had been snooping around, but he knew the difference between a past threat and a current one. Even if there were a couple of terms there he didn't recognise. He turned and made tracks for the exit they had come in by.

The unknowns had already entered the chamber, and were slowly making their way towards the Chief's position. One thing that confused him - there were six of them. But a combination of flashlights emanating from beneath assault rifle barrels, and the continuing, _loud_ bickering told him quite clearly who they were...

"Geez, what _did_ he step him again?"

"I dunno. But it couldn't have been worse than _my_ little accident."

"Yes, but your big feet were asking for it, Corporal. I'm surprised you didn't hit more of them."

A third vice joined the "debate", infused with a somewhat sing song lilt.

"You missed your calling sir. Should have been a Bobby!"

Silence for a moment, before the oddly sounding Corporal butted back.

"Enough of your British lip Smith. Jokes aren't funny if you have to spend half the day figuring them out."

"Not my fault you're uncultured. Surely _everyone_ knows what a Bobby is."

"No, they don't." The fourth figure joined in, an odd accent present on... her(?) voice.

"At least, not until they've spent some time with _you_."

As this last was being spoken, the six man team emerged from the dark. To their credit, they didn't let the sudden appearance of the SPARTAN startle them... not noticeably at any rate. Four marines stared at him and, suprisingly considering the previous banter, three of them were women. It made a change, he supposed, but it was a _little_ unusual. _Must __all __be __Tomboys._ According to the labels popping up in his HUD, "Charles Smith" was the team's sole male. Goodness knew how he'd failed to be chewed out for his previous

comment.

One of the two non-marines, a slender woman dressed in a rather form fitting orange top that left little to the imagination, came towards him. She was carrying a small pistol, but nothing else to suggest she was military.

"Ah, so we've finally caught up with you. Found anything yet?"

No HUD IFF tag either. The Chief looked to the corporal in charge of the team, one Angela Larront. The middle aged redhead nodded to indicate he should answer.

"A control centre of some kind. We've yet to figure what for, miss..."

"Anders. Professor Anders. Right, that would make it my turn then..." She pushed past the Chief and strode, blinking, into the bright lights of the control room. The Chief looked back at the corporal. She got the message.

"Yes, she's always like this. At least, that's what it looks like, considering her attitude for the entire journey here."

"Speaking of which," interjected the second private - Tara Speak, a faintly oriental twenty something year old, "I guess I'd better keep an eye on her." She moved to follow the professor, rather reluctantly it seemed. Another thought came to the Chief.

"How did you find me?"

"Well, that was the simple bit." answered Smith, "Checked your boots lately old boy?"

The Chief looked down, distantly aware of Corporal Larront firmly giving Smith his "last warning". Completely against all odds, there was a slight silvery sheen to them, where a good number of nanomites were still clinging on. A glance around revealed a line of footprints stretching off and out of sight, a minor loop veering around the room behind.

...

Hold on... hadn't the bot slop slithered off last time he'd checked? So where had this lot come from?

"Larront!" A sudden, loud call from Anders made the marines jump. "Bring our friend up here, I want to see if he can translate these glyphs."

The two women looked at each other. "Was she talking to you or me?" voiced the private. The Chief idly noted her IFF tag - Mira Larront. Sisters? There was some resemblance there, although the private had hair a lighter shade of red, and was slightly stouter. Not to mention about ten years younger.

"Search me." responded the other. "United front?"

Some form of unspoken agreement flashed between them, followed by Mira turning and using her foot to nudge a miserable looking Patab

into the circle of flashlights. The Chief had registered the Unggoy's presence earlier, but beyond a quick check that he was unharmed, had decided it was none of his business. Patab apparently thought otherwise.

"Demon?"

Now, that was a first, having the term "Demon" applied to him in a relieved tone of voice. It didn't seem natural. While he was pondering this, he allowed his legs to trail the rest of the group, back into the control centre. Almost immediately, Cortana's voice filled the air - the AI broadcasting through every speaker she could find. Much to the amusement of the marines, Anders jumped!

"_Four_ of them? Chief, keep your eyes where they belong!" The unspoken message was clear. _This __one __is __mine_.

For a time, progress looked like it was going to be slow. Anders it seemed, was unwilling to let an AI take the glory for discovering the purpose of this facility - especially not one that she had only just met. At her _suggestion_, the humans split up, circling and checking the room individually. Patab quickly got a fair bit of verbal flak from the "pushy professor" (as Smith eloquently muttered under his breath) when she discovered that he was as unlearned in the school of Forerunner runes as the marines. As she gave a hugely exaggerated sigh of annoyance and started translating the glyphs the hard way, Patab wisely took his cue and got away from her. He hunkered down in a shadowy corner, under the watchful eye of the younger Larront.

###

SOLAR WIND TO ALL GROUND TEAMS.

POSSIBLE F.C.F. LOCATED AT FOLLOWING COORDINATES.
INVESTIGATE.

###

It didn't take _too_ long after arrival for something to happen. In this case, "something" was actually two "somethings" - Cortana suddenly tired of waiting for the professor to concede defeat, and the British marine just so happened to lean against a wall, and drop his rifle into a conveniently knee height alcove...

A loud humming filled the air as Cortana quietly fed power to waiting systems, soon joined by a rather unpleasant gurgling noise. The humans looked up.

"Scan complete," murmured a quiet voice from above Smith's head, "initiating stage two."

"Smith, what have you done _this __time_?" moaned the corporal.

"Nothing sir. Why are you always blaming me?"

"I wonder..." commented Mira.

"Stage three now active. Alchemy object stabilised."

Anders was looking somewhat distant now. The lack of visual accompaniment to the announcements was allowing her mind to wander instead. And now the voice had shut up, no new information was coming.

Angela noticed something trivial.

"Smith, where's your weapon?"

The private looked down. And paused. A couple of seconds later...

"Which one?"

The Chief looked up from the little data file on Enforcers that Cortana had plonked into his HUD, just in time to see Smith hold up a pair of identical rifles! Anders focussed her eyes, did a quick count of the number of weapons present in the room, and opened them as wide as physically possible. The Chief became aware of a quiet snickering coming through his earpiece. Meanwhile, Anders performed the difficult feat of crossing the room at speed, yet doing it in a very cautious looking fashion. If he'd been anything other than a SPARTAN, he would have rubbed his eyes, helmet or not. From the look on Smith's face, he couldn't quite believe his senses either.

The professor put her hand out Smith dutifully passing over one of the rifles. A quick examination (during which Smith tried desperately to catch a glimpse of the safety catch) checking the weight, the balance, noting any odd markings and signs of use, and she swapped it for the other. A couple of minutes later, she wordlessly passed both to the corporal who likewise found no differences. Cortana was snickering from every speaker in the room by now. Anders nonetheless continued to ignore her.

"Smith," she asked in a voice that betrayed no emotion whatsoever, "What did you do?"

The private looked momentarily puzzled, before drawing his magnum. "Uh... I just dropped it here."

He placed the weapon in the alcove. Within the mainframe, Cortana electronically smiled and did her thing. A hazy green light suddenly filled the alcove, and just as quickly vanished. The humming and gurgling returned.

"Scan complete." the computer's voice repeated. "Initiating stage 2."

As the team watched, the gurgling noise peaked, and a metallic gel rose through the grille in the base of the next alcove along. The air within grew hazy, static energy crackling between gel and immediate surroundings, before the flowing gloop coalesced into the shape of a second pistol. Over the next few seconds it solidified, and took on the correct textures. And, as the noise faded away to nothing, the humans were left looking at another magnum identical in all ways to the first.

"Stage 3 now active. Alchemy object stabilised."

Mira put her hand out to pick up the newly formed weapon, but was somehow beaten to the punch when Patab sidled in from nowhere and effortlessly grabbed it first. Everyone froze as the newly armed Unggoy turned the weapon over in his claws.

"What so special about this?" He shook it, accidentally hit a switch and the clip fell out. Bullets spilled everywhere, jingling across the floor.

"Whoopsie!"

That broke the spell. "I'll take that, thank you very much!" Mira announced, plucking the magnum from the Unggoy's loose grasp. Meanwhile, Tara Speek was gathering up the scattered rounds and parent magazine.

"9 rounds," she counted, checking the magazine as well. "How many left in the original, Smith?"

"Take a wild guess."

"Uh... nine?" Smith nodded, but failed to elaborate on which hostile, shadow or hostile shadow was currently holding on to the rest of the clip's starting load. This was mostly due to Cortana audibly chuckling again.

"So professor, figured out the purpose of this facility yet?" Anders responded by making her expression as thunderous as possible. There was an audible squeal from Patab, about the same time as Cortana continued with a simple "look outside". Unable to stop herself, Anders complied, correctly assuming "outside" meant the vehicle storage bays. She didn't quite let herself gasp, but everyone sensed the wave of surprise flooding out from her.

Out in one of the bays, a large amount of metallic gel was already taking the shape of a Warthog LRV. Or rather, as the Chief recognised, a Warthog troop transport. Like the pistol before it, the new vehicle was rapidly stabilised, taking on an slightly a-typical mottled grey and green paint scheme as it did so.

Mira Larront was the first to speak, as the Chief moved to do his own examination. "Nice... what's the catch?"

"Oh, nothing you need to worry about. By the way, there's no fuel in the tank, but the engine should be able to handle the en-site fuel substitute. Just attach that hose at the back to the fuel intake and turn the valve. I wouldn't trust the automatic flow regulation system if I were you."

The Chief finished his investigation, checked the "fuel substitute", and wordlessly signalled the rest of the team. Cortana finally returned to the MJOLNIR.

"By the way, most of the Sentinels in here are converging on our position. There must have been a security subsystem I missed. It might be a good idea to come back later."

Anders looked for a moment like she was going to object, but held off as the corporal whispered something in her ear. The Chief wasn't especially brilliant at lip reading, but it was a fairly safe bet

that the elder Larront was reminding the professor that, SPARTAN or no, when sentinels showed up, things started dying. And that Anders didn't even have the limited body armour of the marines.

In the meantime, Cortana was remote probing the security server again. The Chief sensed her mental amusement, even if he was unsure of just why she was amused. Thankfully, she soon let everyone else know.

"Don't worry professor, I've just put a counter program into the system. There's nothing I can do about the Sentinels coming to investigate now, but it won't happen next time. Plus I've left a translator program and security backdoor so you'll be able to access the facility yourself next time. The only password you'll need is horse as in Trojan horse. Now see how useful we AI's are?"

Anders gave a surprisingly gracious and diplomatic reply. "Oh, I'm well aware of that. I just prefer not to become reliant on you. Especially when I don't actually know you yet." She wisely left the "or trust you" bit unspoken.

The other marines had by now hooked the Warthog up to the fuel supply and, despite a fair bit of bungling resulting from having too many hands, filled the tank. The team, now alert to the whine of approaching Sentinels, quickly mounted up, the Corporal taking the wheel. The Chief found himself wedged in the back, between Smith and Patabâ€| uh, when did he get on board? Sometimes you had to wonder about the Unggoy â€" they were deceptively harmless in battle â€" well harmless to a SPARTAN â€" but they kept finding new ways to catch you off guard. Fuel rod cannons came to mind. Before the final battle on board the Truth and Reconciliation, those most powerful of Covenant infantry carried weapons had only been encountered embedded in a Hunter's armour. Then the Grunts came round the corner wielding these monstrosities andâ€| you know the rest.

Cortana sent a coded pulse to open the exit blast doors, and the Warthog slowly cruised out. It was an annoyingly short distance back to the exterior, considering the great distance they'd had to travel through maintenance tunnels on the way in, but there wasn't any point moaning about it now. Back in the light of day, they paused while Tara hopped off to retrieve the Gauss Warthog parked outside.

"How on Earth did you all fit in that thing?" asked Cortana.

"With great difficulty ma'am." answered Smith. "Sardines in a can would be a good analogy, if an overused one. Good thing a Thorn didn't show up, there was no way we could use the Gauss cannon in that state. Otherwise we'd have given it a right proper thrashing!"

Cortana took a moment to respond, quite possibly trying to figure out the way to least give offense with her next line.

"You know, you don't really sound British. More like someone trying to imitate them on and off."

Smith thankfully didn't take it personally. "Well, that may be the case, but my ancestry is British. Problem is, I've been "corrupted"

by the rowdy bunch in the mess hall. It's the same sort of thing for Tara â€" that's not her real name by the way, just the adopted one. We couldn't pronounce the other â€" _What __the __hell__'__s __going __on __over __there_?"

The Chief looked forwards, in the direction of Alpha Base. All three of the Hornets were airbourne, along with two of the Hornets and a trio of Pelicans. All ducking and diving, swooping and twirling like a swarm demented flies that had just inhaled a thorax full of bug spray. And then something else came to eyeâ€|

"_Oh __flipping __hell_!"

###

Archon â€" Sector 16, Alpha Base

Captain Cutter was busy pondering the latest news from Scout team Charlie when the commotion began. At first, he believed it to be a simple argument â€" fraying tempers leading to an imminent slugfest, but the noise soon told him otherwise. He quickly got up and headed for the command tent's entrance. He nearly made it tooâ€|

â€|except for the Sentinel _coming __the __other __way_!

Man and machine looked at each other, weary eye to tireless lens. The machine quickly got bored, conceded victory in the staring match to the startled captain, and began nosing its way around the rest of the tent. Cutter glanced towards the loaded pistol lying on the chart table, considered making a move for itâ€| then decided against such hasty action as the Sentinel floated over the table and looked down.

"_Captain! __We__'__ve __got __trou- _oh." A flustered looking marine dashed in, rifle at the ready.

"Thank you private, I hadn't noticed." Cutter growled. He continued watching the intruder as it turned its single eye to the portable computer terminal standing in the centre of the room.
"Situation?"

"Uhâ€| machines all over the camp! They haven't opened hostilities yet, but they're making everyone _very_ nervous. There seems to be one to each tent, and a shitload more just generally prowling the base. The men are holding fire at the moment, but I don't know how long that'll last!"

"Language, Taylor. What does it seem they're after?" The Sentinel had moved on, and was _investigating __the __coffee __tray __of __all __things_!

"Simple reconnaissance Sir! There doesn't seem to be a specific goal, they just methodically clear a section and move on." As he spoke, the Sentinel checked the radio equipment in the corner, took one last glance around the tent, and coasted out. The captain followed, Taylor at his heels.

There was definitely a sense of confusion outside. Marines and navy personnel stood in loose groups here and there, weapons held in trembling hands, doing their best not to make actual physical contact

with the machines swarming the camp. There were a few hotheads visible, snarls evident on their furious faces, but even they knew there would be no chance for the humans in a straight up fight.

A small amount of hope arrived in the form of three armour clad giants striding purposefully up the avenue. The wayward Red team had finally returned, one of them with a dead Thorn draped over hisâ€| or herâ€| shoulder. Cutter sensed the level of awe directed at the SPARTANS kick up another notch. Completely ignoring the Sentinels â€" apart from retrieving a plasma pistol from the one emerging from the alien weapons tent (which wisely chose not to argue, and simply reversed back inside) â€" they marched up to the captain and saluted. Only then did they speak on the little matter of the personal space invasion.

"Visitors Sir?" asked the one in front. Probably Jerome, but it could just as easily have been Douglas â€" that armour was giving nothing away.

"So it seems."

"Your orders?"

Cutter had no doubt that, should he wish it, the little team would proceed without question to methodically slaughter the Sentinelsâ€| until weight of numbers brought them down. The SPARTANS were good, but they weren't invincible. Not even with their vaunted mk. IV MJOLNIR armour. And there would be a lot of collateral damage.

"Let them be for the moment. This camp's survival is my top priority, not initiating a bloodbath."

"Yes Sir." The lead SPARTAN motioned the third forward.

"Present for you Sir." commented the (for now) friendly green giant, in a completely serious voice. She â€" that voice had most definitely been female, so it had to be Alice â€" dropped the Thorn's carcass at Cutter's feet, causing him to involuntarily take a step back. The smell rising up wasn't pleasant to say the least. He tried not to gag.

"Is this really the time?" asked Taylor, still standing behind the captain. The first SPARTAN answered.

"We aren't in combat."

Taylor didn't quite know how to respond to that one; he didn't know what they did outside combat. No one did. In fact, there was a long standing urban myth going round, that the SPARTANS weren't even human. Not that anyone ever said it out loud, not within earshot of one.

The five of them continued watching the Sentinels. The SPARTANS looked relaxed, but Cutter knew enough about them not to be fooled. The majority of the personnel standing around were looking more nervous than ever, and had done the second most stupid move ever â€" clustered into large groups. Safety in numbers? Nope, BIGGER TARGET! A couple of the more fidgety ones seemed to have realised the flaws in their planâ€|

And then, salvation! As one, the Sentinels rose skywards, congregated into a single great flock, and set off northwards. As the entire human camp let out a truly huge sigh of relief, Cutter only had eyes for a single, small detail.

“One of the Sentinels was carrying a plasma pistol”

###

An hour later, the Chief was holding a mild discussion with the captain, corporal Lenkin and Corporal Carther. The latter two were still shaken by their ordeal in the canyon, and were somewhat startled to learn of the Sentinel incursion. There were a lot of ideas going around.

All parties were tired, but there was a lot of work to be done. Questions to answer, problems to solve “that sort of thing. Foremost on the agenda was the appearance of the unidentified mecha. Cortana was particularly interested in this one, especially when Lenkin's video log was displayed on the projector screen in the corner of the tent. The Forerunner remnants were worry enough, but Cutter really didn't like the idea of machines of that power running around, without even the slightest inkling of what their motives could be. Carther admitted that they'd caught one last sight of them, swooping and circling around a large dome on the southern side of the lake.

With the supply issue partially solved by the Alchemist, the Chief offered to take a look. Cutter quickly authorised the mission.

"One more thing." The captain announced just as the Chief was turning to leave. "I'd like to borrow your AI. Our own is still offline, and we need a number of issues sorted."

"Do I get a say in this?" responded Cortana immediately.

"Of course. I'd like you to analyse a number of mission logs, both from here, and our time back on the last world we visited. I believe Serina has already done the latter, but she has yet to make her report."

"Okay, I'm interested. Will this include the logs for Scout team Charlie?"

"Yes. I'll also require analysis on what we believe were Forerunner starships. We didn't get particularly good shots, considering we had other things on our minds at the time, but-

"Were these ships long and thin, with three rear limbs? Because if so, we've already seen one."

Cutter paused, trying to get his memory to yield the best images it could. It took a while.

"No, they didn't appear to be anything like that. More squat, with outrider portions."

Cortana took a relatively long time (but not in human terms) to mull over her prospects. On the one hand, she'd be able to access

considerably more information, but on the otherâ€¦ she'd be separated from the Chief again.

The SPARTAN could almost have been reading her mind. "Don't worry Cortana, you won't be in any danger here, and I'm sure you'll be of great value to the captain. I can handle myself for one mission."

Cortana could quite clearly see that she no longer had a choice. Not a real one. It was almost as if some invisible puppeteer had specifically arranged the universe into this position, and was now laughing at her. She didn't mind too much though â€" knowledge was the second thing she lived for.

"Fine, I'll stay here this time. But â€" and I know this is a stupid thing to say to you â€" be careful, and _don_'__t __take __all __year_!"

She flashed out and into the portable terminal, moving quickly so she couldn't change her mind. Her image appeared on the attached holotank, staring at the Chief.

"Are you taking an escort? A team of marines, perhaps another SPARTAN?" the captain asked.

"I travel faster alone." stated the Chief, conveniently forgetting that the other SPARTANS had had the same training as him. But not the experienceâ€¦ and their MJOLNIR didn't carry shields either. Next time maybe, when the marines had adapted to their new environment, but not now.

The captain however, had one last proposition.

"Here." he said, holding out a data chip. "Our own AI, Serina. She's disabled at the moment, but if she comes back online she may be of some assistance. Just make sure you return her intact."

The Chief looked at the chip, then reached out and took it. "I willâ€¦ Sir." he responded, as he saluted, about faced, and left.

Cortana watched him goâ€¦

###

Archon â€" _Orbit_

High above, the pilot of one of the orbiting harrier imitations was just nosing its way into the deathly cold surroundings of a _Spirit __of __Fire_ launch bay, when it unexpectedly got pinged from below. The message, was a single verse of rhyme.

â€¦

What are you planning? Why aren't you running? Shouldn't you be scared, when nothing is coming?

â€¦

Three hours later, messages were still flashing through the void

between the eight orbital craftâ€¦|

###

Authors notes:

Okay, that was longer than I originally intended. The issue here being that I suddenly realised this was the perfect moment to throw in a little Foreshadowing, a few more Chekov's gunsâ€¦| you get the picture. Another reason would be that I looked back at the first chapter, and realised that my writing quality seems to have gone downhill a bit. It's to be expected when I've got university work clogging up my head, but now that I'm aware of it, the problem should hopefully lessen. At least I spotted the doc manager craftily merging italic sentences into single, monster words _before_ _updating!

For those that don't know, energy shielding only came with the MJOLNIR mk. V onwards, the type the Chief uses in Halo 1. The _Spirit of Fire_ SPARTANs have the older mk IV, on account of the mk. V not being issued until just before the battle for Reach. And the _Spirit_ went missing _long_ before that.

Okay, rambling time!

I'm probably about to lose half the limited followers I've got with a certain decision made in this chapter, but it will work out in the end.

That's it for new OC characters for a while, even if some haven't yet been named. Well, one in particular in that latter case. As for factions however, we've got 3 major ones at present, 2 minor (although they've only been hinted at so far, and barely at that), and another 6 or so still waiting to show up. It won't be long before things start to get _very_ complicated.

This, incidentally, is also where the "Firmanent Fractures" arc kicks off. I doubt anyone's looked at my profile page, but in brief, this will be a minor arc that will link in to a number of other fanfics that I've got planned (See profile for summaries). The end result of that, still a long way off, will be a massive crossover where all of the loose ends relating to this arc get tied up. Don't worry though, Firmanent Fractures will always take the back seat to the main Halo Genetics story.

By the way, if you have any questions about the story, just PM or review me, and I'll answer in the next chapter. This applies from here onwards.

And the Bobby "joke"? Traditionally, British policemen have big feet. But you probably worked that one out anywayâ€¦|

Thanks for reading so far, hope I've piqued your interest for what's still to come! (But knowing my luck, I've actually scared a load off!)

...And I wonder what mistakes you eagle eyed readers will spot this time. Please let me know (that wasn't sarcasm by the way)!

Next Phase: To tempt a Magpieâ€¦|

5. Phase 5: To tempt a Magpie

****Halo: Genetics****

(A/N): Okay, I know I said no more OC's yet, but there's been a minor change of plans. Namely a look at something a little outside of Archon's immediate surroundings. Sorry about that!

â€|Warning, this chapter is a long one, about 50% longer than the last. But seeing as it will probably be the last until after New Yearâ€|

****Glossary****

From this chapter onwards, if a Covenant viewpoint is used when referring to a weapon, it will often be given the Covenant tag. For this chapter then:

Krik - Okay, I made it up. I needed some form of Kig-Yar expletive, but I've failed to find an official one. So this is my stand in.

Type 25 energy Pistol â€" Plasma pistol.

Type 50 Sniper rifle system â€" Particle Beam rifle.

Magpie: Explained at the bottomâ€| not that anyone will probably need itâ€|

Disclaimer: Okay, the characters Troq, Gip, Shrii, Ahqq'R-Yar, and Tina Maloski, along with any Monitors that may or may not show up are MINE, as are the two named ships and this interpretation of the Privateer II class. Everything else, I've merely borrowed for a little fun. The base plot and primary setting for this fanfic are also mine, but everything else currently belongs to 343Industries. (Operative word: Currentlyâ€|)

****Phase 5: To Tempt A Magpieâ€|****

Archon â€" Sector 16, exact location unknown

The skeletal forest is grim, as they always are. A distinctly chilly feel pervades the air of this hidden, rocky gorge, as if something deeply disturbing has occurred here. There is little movement, the creaking trees above swaying slightly in the low wind. There is little sound, a solitary rustle in the leaf litter denoting the tiny rodent analogue shuffling its way past in search of food. There is little light, a single glowing point tries to do its job, but fails miserably against the encroaching gloom. Even the faint illumination from the overhead galaxy is no help, not with the fog twisting its way through the gloomy surroundings.

Of course, part of the reason this place is so spooky, is the presence of the pair of Warthog. And, their passengersâ€|

###

Deep Space, Vicinity of Shield World Alpha (Defunct)

A debris field. Hundreds of them exist across the galaxy, sole reminders of once awe inspiring, space going craft. Wreckage twists and tumbles, collides and drifts apart in an infinite dance of sadness. No more will these battered remains traverse the cosmos, soaring the skies of alien worlds. No longer will they dive into vast nebulae, skim their way across celestial rings, or engage in physics defying flights of fancy around one another. If ships had souls, this would be one melancholy graveyardâ€|

And it would be, were this your usual bog standard debris field. But not all such phenomenon result from mere naval engagements. If this one had, whole fleets, no, whole armadas would have duked and duelled, only to be replaced by still more ships, a never ending stream of explosions feeding ever more scrap metal to the funeral pyre.

Or perhaps, there was but one truly massive explosion. Like, say, an exploding planet. Welcome back, to the remains of a once proud Forerunner Shield World, the victim of a single, almost insignificant ship. The UNSC Spirit of Fire certainly left its mark on the place. The Solitary star continues to shine its light across the world, but the planet is no longer a single cohesive mass. Some sizeable fragments remain â€" most of them roughly on the scale of a large Earth city, and one that has yet to drop below the size ofâ€| well, Florida. But even that piece is gradually shrinking, its considerable mass being whittled away piece by piece as it continues to be assailed by countless smaller fragments. Even nanomites couldn't resurrect an ent- did something just move?

â€|

Okay, wrong question. Of course something moved. Every visible bit of rock, every piece of twisted metal is on the move, and that isn't likely to change anytime soon. Kinetic energy is a nightmare to get rid of. What I should have asked was something along the lines of "what's that object weaving its way through the heart of the rock storm?". But a closer look renders the question rather unnecessary.

A small blue-black vessel lurks amongst the myriad tumbling debris. Lurking is the only word that could be truthfully applied to such a ship, it's smooth, segmented hull and insectoid head like bridge clearly spelling out who it belongs to. Just what else could a Kig-Yar ship do, but lurk? The question is, just what is it doing lurking around here?

The ship continues on its way, steadfastly ignoring most of the mere rocks rolling past â€" bar performing a light scan with passive sensors â€" and instead focuses its attention on anything and everything with even the slightest trace of metal content. There's quite a bit of that; this planet wasn't exactly natural, with superstructure embedded into its very crust. A fair number of starships were present as well, a fleet of advanced Forerunner warships and a single Covenant destroyer; all were consumed when the Spirit sacrificed its slipspace drive to sunder the world. But the fragments remaining from those are pitifully small and far dispersed from one another.

By now, it seems a fairly safe bet that these Kig-Yar are in fact,

scavengers. But, a little confirmation wouldn't go amissâ€|

###

SHIPMASTER'S LOG

I'M BEGGINNING TO SUSPECT THAT THE FOOL WHO SOLD ME THE INFORMATION LEADING TO OUR CURRENT ACTIVITIES _MAY_ HAVE HAD MORE THAN HALF A BRAIN AFTER ALL. HE WAS TELLING THE TRUTH, AS UNLIKELY AS HIS STORY WAS â€" WE HAVE FOUND EVIDENCE THAT THE FORMER PROPHET OF REGRET DID INDEED FIND SOMETHING OUT THIS WAY, BUT THE _KRIK-ING __SLIME __FAILED __TO __MENTION __THE __DEBRIS __FIELD __WE__'__D __HAVE __TO __ROOT __THROUGH!_ YES, WE HAVE FOUND FORERUNNER SALVAGE, BUT NOWHERE NEAR THE IMPLIED HOLD FULL AND MORE! AT BEST, THE TRIP WILL COVER OUR EXPENSES AND MORE, BUT WE WERE EXPECTING A _LOT _MORE THAN _THIS __PILE __OF __SCRAP_!

ONE WAY OR ANOTHER, THIS WILL _NOT_ BE FORGOTTEN, THAT WILL BECOME QUITE CLEAR TO THAT SLIMEBALL WHEN WE RETURN TO EAYN, MAKE NO MISTAKE!

â€|

Deep Space â€" Vicinity of Shield World Alpha (Defunct), Kig-Yar Privateer II class Fated Opportunity

The ship jerked sharply to the side again, sending a hissing Troq into a neatly stacked pile of Forerunner salvage. The fact that the pile was no longer "neat" after this collision was the least of the long suffering Kig-Yar's problems. He shuddered as a tentacle appeared from behind, rubbed across his spiny head crest, and withdrew with an accompanying chitter of disappointment.

As the Kig-Yar got himself to trembling feet, the owner of the tentacle emerged from the debris, carefully lowering the last gizmo from where it had been stubbornly hanging onto the creature's carapace as it did so. The newest Huragok to the loose band of creatures loosely referred to as the "crew" looked at him, before it silently got on with the task of restacking. Troq watched it work in the usual dispassionate way reserved for the being's species. A tool, nothing more. That was the only way to view the sentient, organic machines; acknowledgement would only lead to unwelcome ideas, and tools weren't supposed to talk back. One reason the Kig-Yar of the _Fated __Opportunity_ didn't use Yanme'e.

Not that Huragok didn't have problems associated with themâ€|

Troq meanwhile, had other things to do than supervise the tools. Shaking his head to clear the last of the haze, he patted his hips to check the continued presence of the exotic scanner chip Shipmaster Ahqq'R-Yar (whose simple mind had completely failed to pick up on the "R" being used for _female_ commanders) had sent him to collect. Yes, still thereâ€| but where the _Krik_ was his type 25 Sidearm? With the ominous sound of chirping he had his answer, as his sharp eyes observed the Huragok picking up the escapee weapon and start to inspect it with diverging cilia.

"_Mine!_" he hissed, snatching the pistol from the alien's grasp. It responded by looking momentarily annoyed â€" if a Huragok could

display a suitable façade of such an emotion " then clucking to itself, got back to work. By that point though, Troq had already left, and was heading for what was laughably called the ship's "control centre".

Another jerk, just as Troq was passing through a particularly narrow gap between piles of salvage. This time the Kig-Yar managed to keep himself upright " just " by grabbing hold of the scorched remains of a Forerunner mechanical guardian. A snarl amid the clatter of metal announced that Shrii " the only _female_ Kig-Yar on board " had not been so fortunate. _That_ little incident was going to severely damage Gip's chances when she next came into season, a better result than from any conceivable sabotage on Troq's part. But seeing as she had an unfortunate tendency to blame any personal misfortune on the next creature to enter her field of vision, perhaps it would be a good idea to make tracks. _Now_.

Troq followed his brain's advice, and quickly scuttled out of the makeshift hold. That left him with the simple (in theory, if not in practice) task of negotiating the short bow to stern passage. The clutter strewn about made that risky enough, but what _really_ tugged at Troq's sanity were the _other __two_ Tools taking up most of the narrow space. "Tools" once again meaning Huragok.

Huragok. Troq was definitely getting fed up with the floating gas bags, always in the way as they were. It didn't help his mood that, earlier in the salvage operation, the three Huragok on board had unexpectedly become four. The simultaneous disappearance of an equivalent amount of metallic maintenance supplies was enough to reveal _exactly_ what had happened. Shipmaster Ahqq'R-Yar had been _furious_ at that one; replacing the supplies would cost money (assuming some un-alert "associate" couldn't make a _donation_), which would eat into profits, which _in __turn_ would be taken out of Troq, Gip and Shrii's collective share. Because of course, the shipmaster believed in "fairness". That is, it _is_ fair that the shipmaster delegates responsibility downwards. _All_ of it. He owns the ship, he gets the benefits.

The biggest question was, how long could he last after _that_ one? Kig-Yar subscribed to the "Dead bodies hold no rank" philosophy, along with the "succession by assassination". Completely unlike the barbaric humans and the backward Sangheili, both of whom believed in their own version of "fairness". And that made them all the more incomprehensible" and despicable.

The last Tool was floating outside the door to the control centre. Venting the _tiniest_ fraction of his pent up frustration, Troq snapped his toothy jaw at the being, as he roughly shoved it backwards. The tool squealed, but by then he was through the door and into the antechamber. _Just_ in time to catch the tail end of Ahqq'R-Yar's outburst of "_utter __incompetence!_", closely succeeded by a pair of ferocious snarls and the appearance of an almost frothing at the jaw Gip. The other Kig-Yar bulled his way past Troq, elbowing him roughly aside with snapping jaw but nary a glance, and stormed out. Troq caught some mutter of "repurposing the drive for a _little __acciden_t", before the door jerked shut behind him. A faint squeal from the Huragok phased through the metal, but Troq couldn't care less" as long as the Tool wasn't killed. _That_ would only mean more work for _him_.

Around about now, Troq's devious mind clicked into overdrive. It was clear from Gip's purely aggressive stance that the shipmaster was in the mood for making enemies. Admittedly, Gip always looked like that â€" most Kig-Yar did, in fact â€" but the sheer temper evident had been a step above even the normal limits. About seventy percent of Troq's brain quietly shunted into "opportunity mode", i.e. cataloguing all of the potential ways to off the current superior, and preferably before Gip did. That would be the most difficult part, making his move first, otherwise he'd just have to encourage Gip into the afterlife as wellâ€|

Kig-Yar politics, always a brutal game. But Troq wouldn't have it any other way. Only the smart had any right to survive â€" not the strong, the smart.

The aggressive aura emanating from the shipmaster occupied cabin had dropped off slightly by now, so Troq made his move. Better now than later, especially if he wanted to be in the right mind set for engineering a change in the rankings on board. He quickly ducked into the restrictive two console control centre, not bothering to knock. Knocking was for Sangheili, Sangheili or worse (â€|Humans).

The Shipmaster was prowling the small deck space in front of his opulent command chair â€" one of the more unexpected items of salvage from a previous trip â€" a suitably calculating glint in his eyesâ€| quite hard to spot if you didn't know Ahqq'R-Yar's ways. Of course, the Kig-Yar on board were all versed in such analysis. Know how to read your target, and you'll gain a better understanding of how they think. Know how they think, and you can catch them off guard.

Assuming, in this case, Troq could get past the problem of the type-50 sniper rifle laying on the shipmaster's console. He idly entertained the thought of finding some way to use the weapon to eviscerate its owner, but just as idly dropped the notion. Poetic, but too messy. Accidents, remember? No doubt that was the reason the weapon was so blatantly within reach â€" Ahqq'r-Yar was well aware that such an overt move was against the Kig-Yar way, and had left it such to mentally screw up his underlings. Well, __we__'__ll __see __who__'__s __laughing __by __the __time __this __little __mission __is __over__, thought Troq.

The shipmaster, possibly aware of the sort of thoughts charging round Troq's head, chose that moment to hiss. Troq automatically hissed back, knowing that Ahhq'R-Yar believed that the quiet, submissive ones, were the ones to watch. Well __that __may __be, __but __you __should __know __not __to __turn __your __back __on __**any **__Kig-Yar.__ Even __when __you __have __a __ (presumably) __fully __charged __type-50 __within __easy __reach.__

"You have it?" the Shipmaster asked, eyes boring into Troq's skull with almost physical effect.

"Yes, Shipmaster." answered Troq, in a suitably reverent fashion. But both of them knew he was only going through the motions. As far as the Kig-Yar race was concerned, the San-Shyuum were the only beings worthy of respectâ€| and even then, only when it allowed some perk, some asset they could stealthily appropriate. The other known sentient life-forms weren't even worth a mention, not by any true Kig-Yar.

Ahqq'R-Yar stared a little longer, Troq refusing to shuffle his talons or give any other sign that the other unnerved him. Finally, with a snort of annoyance, the Shipmaster nodded his beak towards the forward console, and more precisely the uncovered access panel next to it. Troq purposefully moved over, giving the console a quick once over as he passed. With Gip apparently relieved from piloting duties, the radically repurposed human AI that they had "acquired" a few years back had been activated. Troq snorted as he remembered that the humans apparently called this particular one a "dumb" AI, then removed the scanner chip from his belt and stuck his snout into the exposed maze of circuitry. A spark took the opportunity to leap from a poorly shielded conduit to his nose, causing him to uncontrollably give a faint yelp. _Has __**Krik-ing __**_Ahqq __actually __turned __this __lot __off? __Or __is __he __just __waiting __for __me __to __electrocute __myself?_ â€| _It __must __be __about __Shrii, __**again**__._ Giving his best impersonation of a human scowl, he started to fiddle around, looking for the exact slot he needed to plug the chip in. One slot, amongst a dozen others that looked nearly identical. _Why __do __we __jury __rig __our __ships __again?

The breaking of the Covenant had not been an entirely good thing for the Kig-Yar. They were now out from the watchful eyes of the few surviving San-Shyuum, but while they could now be more overt with their clandestine activities, they no longer had the Covenant technology caches to dip a claw into whenever someone wasn't looking. Both the Sangheili and the Jiralhanae were well aware of the habit of piracy deeply ingrained into the Kig-Yar personality, they were hard to fool. Yanme'e, Unggoy and Lekgolo didn't have anything worth taking, so Troq's species had been forced to revert to the old waysâ€|

â€|Admittedly, they'd never truly left them, but it was still an unwanted hassle. They were now forced to recycle their old technology more than ever before, and the amount of jury rigged components had skyrocketed. The _Fated __Opportunity_ was a case in point. The original Privateer class had been a line of scoutships, also used on diplomatic flights â€" such as there were. The Privateer II class meanwhile wasn't so much a single type of ship as a whole range. They all had the same general purpose, but they all differed somewhat in shape. The _Opportunity_ was unusual in that it was _close_ to the original design, but there were still various differences. The AI, even dumber now than when the humans had "owned" it, was one such difference.

Troq finally found the right slot and rammed the chip in. A rising hum indicated the sensor block powering up previously unused segments, but as abruptly as it had started, it died again.

"_What __the __**Krik __**__are __you __playing __at __in __there?_" shouted the Shipmaster, from the direction of his comfortable command chair. Beginning to seethe again, Troq tried a little percussive maintenance, which seemed to do the job. Almost immediately, his relief turned to horror as the thing started to let out a siren call, which was just plain _painful_ when your head was jammed into the same narrow space the noise emanated from. Amplification didn't even come close to the sheer boosting power of the confined space.

Another injury to add to the insult; as Troq pulled himself out from

the workspace, he was clawed by Ahqq'R-Yar's talons as the latter strode over to the beeping console. Troq thought quite seriously about biting the soon to be gone Shipmaster's claw, then thought better of it. _You _live _for _now. _I_'_ll _just _enjoy _the _sight _of _your _battered _corpse _all _the _more_. Instead, he focussed on the alien glyphs popping up on the display. They didn't stay alien for long, the AI efficiently converted the crude human symbols to the more graceful Kig-Yar language, in record time. At least the humans could do _something_ right.

UNSC _CFV-88 __SPIRIT __OF __FIRE_ BEACON

TRANSMITTING TO ALL VIABLE UNSC SHIPS IN VICINITY

"A human beacon?" hissed Troq. "Simpleton!" Ahqq'R-Yar snapped (literally) back. "What _else_ would it be? A Jiralhanae lure for the Sangheili?"

Well, it was possible. But there was no reason to believe _this_ was another crude trap by the mostâ€¦| _Brutish_â€¦| of the Covenant. So, most likely the beacon was exactly what it claimed to be. But there was _one_ thing that didn't make senseâ€¦|

"Why are we picking this up if we aren't a human ship?"

The shipmaster took a split second longer to answer than he should have, had he _really_ known straight off. But the delay gave the clear statement that he'd had to think about it as well.

"But we do have a human construct. It's obviously sending a recognition code."

"A recog- WHAT?" Troq was _not_ happy with that idea. If a Jiralhanae cruiser came along and detected it, how long would the _Fated _Opportunity_ last? About 6 heartbeats, that's how long! The Jiralhanae had a shoot first, examine the corpse later way of dealing with suspected enemy informantsâ€¦|

"Are you a Kig-Yar or a gas guzzler?" Troq's eyes narrowed dangerously at being compared to a _stinking _Unggoy_, and this time he probably wouldn't have been able to hold himself backâ€¦| had Ahqq'R-Yar stopped talking.

"Has your coward's brain even _considered_ the possibilities of this? Have you any _inkling_ of the intelligence we could gather with this? The _profits_?"

Troq _forced_ himself to calm down. Had Gip had this sort of treatment? If it wasn't for the long standing Kig-Yar practice of "Every Kig-Yar stands alone", Troq may even have considered teaming up with the other Kig-Yar. _Considered_. And would obviously be looking for the opportunity for a second assassination before the other got any funny ideas about just _who_ would be Ahqq'R-Yar's successor.

The human message had concluded, and was starting to cycle. Both Kig-Yar paid attention this time.

-UNSC _CFV-88 __SPIRIT __OF __FIRE_ BEACON

-TRANSMITTING TO ALL VIABLE UNSC SHIPS IN VICINITY

-THIS SHIP HAS SUSTAINED EXTENSIVE DAMAGE. WE ARE ATTEMPTING TO RETURN TO EARTH USING NORMAL SPACE. NAVIGATIONAL DATA ATTACHED.

-ADDITIONAL DATA RECEIVED. MESSAGE UPDATED.

-DISREGARD ORIGINAL MESSAGE. NEW HEADING HAS BEEN CHOSEN. WE ARE INVESTIGATING ANOMALOUS READINGS. RELEVANT FILES AND NEW NAVIGATIONAL DATA ATTACHED.

-NO NEW MESSAGES RECEIVED. PARENT SHIP HAS LEFT TRANSMISSION RANGE.

Without speaking, the Shipmaster instructed the AI to open the received files. The construct did so, but agonisingly slow. Both Troq and Ahqq'R-Yar hissed, and not at each other this time.

But when the files came up, all frustration was gone in an instant. The two Kig-Yar gazed in wonder at their new treasure trove of information.

"By the Forerunnersâ€¦" hissed Ahqq'R-Yar, unconsciously lapsing back into the _old_ phase â€" not the correct new one, which would have referenced whoever was _currently_ at the top of the Kig-Yar heap. _Another __sign __that __the __"__Shipmaster__" __is __long __overdue __an __early, __compulsory, __and __above __all __as __**painful **__**as __**possible __**retirement_. With that thought crouching predator like in his mind, Troq voiced the next question, one he could get away with _only_ because it was the sole one a Kig-Yar _should_ voice at moments like this.

"Soâ€¦ How should we use this? Sell it to the highest bidder? Or make use of it ourselves?"

Ahqq'R-Yar opened his jawâ€¦ then closed it with a thoughtful murmur. The shipmasters eyes went blank and closed for a moment, then opened again with a gleam clearly visible within.

"How aboutâ€¦ both? Or more precisely, how about selling it to Sangheili _and_ Jiralhanae?"

Troq didn't bother trying to hide the look of concern this time. But then, his classic Kig-Yar mind delivered the rest of the Shipmaster's seemingly delusional plan.

At present, the former members of the Covenant were fairly divided. The Sangheili, while remaining mostly apart, were known to co-operate with humans from time to time. Repaying honour debts, they called it. A mouthful of garbage if ever there was one. The Jiralhanae were constantly trying to find some advantage that would allow them to strike back at the Sangheili, and by extension, the humans. The lesser members of the Covenant had mostly separated; the Lekgolo and Unggoy returning to their respective home and colony worlds â€" but retaining ties to the Sangheili they had supported at the beginning of the great schism. The Kig-Yar had returned to piracy, the Yanme'e had kept supporting the Jiralhanae (possibly out of self-preservation if the smuggler reports were any indication) and the Huragok kept on doing what they had always done, completely ignoring the teetering

balance of power.

Oh, and the few San-Shyuum who had survived the Flood apocalypse on High Charity simply by dint of being away at the time? All were political prisoners, held in roughly equal numbers by the Sangheili and Jiralhanae.

So, the instigators and the intended victims of the great schism, the Jiralhanae and the Sangheili respectively, were the most likely to benefit from the vague promises this data would present. If it were supplied to both of them, they would each undoubtedly send a force to reconnoitre the area. That would whittle down any local security that the Forerunners had set up, and for good measure the two fleets would carve each other down to a more manageable size. At which point, while the victors were licking their wounds, an enterprising Kig-Yar ship could sneak in, and— well, making off with a Forerunner warship would be a welcome result!

And, if the humans were somehow made to be involved, then all the more chaos to exploit!

All this musing was over in a few seconds, allowing Troq's instincts to inform him of the Shipmaster's stare. He promptly returned it.

"That could have— desired results— Shipmaster." —KRIK! —The —only —Kig-Yar —privateers —who —openly —call —their —commander— "—Shipmaster—" —on —any —occasion —but —an —opening —line —are —the —ones —clearly —considering —assassination! —How —on —Eayn —did —I —**Krik-ing **—slip —up?—

Luckily, Ahqq'R-Yar appeared to have skipped that part of the Kig-Yar rulebook, going by the way his posture and next sentence gave no indication that he had noticed.

"Of course it could! Now, find where that beacon is transmitting from, plot a course that will allow us to recover the device _before_ the _Backstabber_'s _Honour_ picks up the message. Then order the construct to get us out of this field and under way to the nearest Jiralhanae held planet. I am _not_ allowing that _imbecile_ Gip pilot us again. And _don_'t_ think I trust your helplessly mediocre programming skills any more than his; but it's either you or him doing the job and I _still_ remember when it took us the wrong way round Balaho and added _three_ _times_ _the_ _Krik-ing_ _journey_ _distance_!"

Troq immediately cottoned onto a certain issue with that course of action.

"We're leaving _without_ letting _Backstabber_'s _Honour_ know?" The _Backstabber_'s _Honour_ was another Kig-Yar Privateer II class, which had accompanied the _Fated_ _Opportunity_ for the duration of the journey. This was _supposed_ to be a joint salvage operation, but— Ahqq'R-Yar's next words pretty much spelled it out perfectly.

"Of course! Unless of course you'd be foolish enough to give half your share of the profits to them! We made the find, we get the reward! Fair's fair, they wouldn't share their finds with us after

allâ€| and in case your pathetic brain has lost its grip on the memory, _they_ haven't bothered to contact us since we arrived!"

And Troq didn't bother answering. The Shipmaster was right, no point sharing loot with more beings than necessary. Which was another reason why, when he was picking his snout from the deck in the antechamber â€" Ahqq'R-Yar having all but booted him out when the task of instructing the construct was done â€" he didn't feel remorse at what he was about to do.

â€|

The newest Huragok on board was pleasantly surprised to find the next Kig-Yar to speak to him _actually_ __wanted_, through the hastily taught medium of sign language, to learn about the coolant safety systemsâ€|

###

Archon, Sector 16, Alpha Base (Archon occupation, day 3, mid-morning)

Just when you believed you'd been given the last possible Dire Thorn related reason for bad dreams, the universe conspired to throw you another. Captain Cutter was currently the recipient of one such bit of nightmare fuel, this one being the autopsy going on in front of him.

Much to her continued disgust, Dr. Lulu Hershey had drawn the short strawâ€| or rather, the short straw had chosen _her_. Somewhere in the unnecessarily convoluted processes of bureaucracy that had been responsible for assigning all manner of misfits to the crew, the _Spirit_ had somehow ended up _without_ a dedicated xenobiologistâ€| and the closest person in the surviving medical staff had to an autopsy capable doctor, was Hershey. To her credit, she'd only complained once; she knew as well as anyone that the Thorn's needed analysing. No-one wanted a repeat of their "welcome to Archon" visit.

Cutter watched her tentatively lower her oversized tweezers into the unnatural opening in the back of the corpse's neck. After a moment, with surprising precision for someone who allegedly had never done this sort of thing before, they emerged clutching a pale lump of flesh that looked worryingly similar to â€|

â€|a brain. For all the beast's appalling size, the home of its thoughts and instincts was unexpectedly small. Only a fraction larger than a terrestrial wolf's brain by the looks of it. But it was alarmingly dense (in _mass_, not in intelligence) judging by the way Hershey had trouble lifting it over to the waiting sample tray.

As Cutter continued to watch impassively, Hershey took a magnifying glass to the brain, and started poking with one of the other unidentifiable tools that she'd kept swapping between through the course of the examination. One of the marines standing guard could be heard desperately trying not to retch, and he wasn't the only one. Cutter was just better at keeping his outward visage under control. Inside, he was just as disgusted as the marine, and was glad that this was the last part of the autopsy. Although why the brain _wasn__'__t_ in the head was anyone's guess. At least it explained

why Hershey hadn't found it in the earlier head dissection.

To be perfectly honest, if there had been some deity designing these beasts, they had apparently predicted bullets right from the word go. The autopsy had proven one thing – all critical organs were scattered throughout the body, were not in the expected locations, and were hard to target. It seemed that the only way to reliably kill the things was to "turn them into Swiss cheese". That, or blow them apart with rockets, hole them with a SPARTAN laser, or possibly brain shot them. It all depended on whether the marine faced with the unsavoury task of dealing with one, could hit the neck with a high enough calibre bullet.

And Dr. Hershey was about to throw another puzzle into the mix –

Again she raised a pair of tweezers, although it was a smaller pair this time. There was a distinctly icky slurping sound as she pulled something free from within the brain. A sense of confusion arose as she dropped it onto the tray. It jingled. Cutter kept silent, but one of the more iron stomached marines didn't.

"Metal? What, are they cyborgs or something?"

Hershey didn't even look away from the magnifying glass. "No, corporal. This is the first trace of a foreign, artificial agent within the subject. I'm not sure what it does exactly, but it seemed to be attached to the part of the brain dealing with base instinct."

"Your opinion, doctor?" asked Cutter. Hershey took a moment to think about it before submitting her answer.

"Well, considering the actions of the raiding party, I would hazard a guess that it influences the animal's behaviour in some sub-conscious way. How, and for whose benefit, is someone else's area of expertise. If we can obtain other specimens reasonably intact, it would be a good idea to check whether they carry the chip as well. It would go a long way towards explaining their suicidal behaviour if we can confirm that some external authority is manipulating them."

Cutter agreed with her on that point, but there was only one slight problem. All four SPARTANS were currently out of the camp on (this time official) missions. Jerome and Alice were off looking for Scout Team Bravo, who had failed to return from their investigation of the Dawn's crash site, and had likewise failed to check in for the last six hours. Douglas meanwhile had taken Bravo three-ninety nine and lieutenant Falgarn's team and gone north. Which meant that there would be no optional Thorn hunting until one of the four got back. Unless one of the snipers on guard duty got a lucky shot. The question of who would be collecting said theoretical corpse was a harder one. But, to go back to the matter at hand –

"Have you discovered anything else about it?"

"Just a moment Sir." Hershey went back to prodding the grey blob of cerebral flesh. She frowned, and picked up a set of tiny callipers. A little more fiddling, a further check of the tiny gadget, and she stood up. Cutter didn't need to be an expert on human expressions (although he was better at reading them than the average man) to see

she was puzzled.

"It's strange, Sir. I can't be absolutely certain with the damage to this specimen, but there seems to be no trace of how the device got there. No signs of former surgery, nothing. It's almost as if it was always present, and the brain just grew around it"

Cutter sensed that this was way out of his knowledge base. He decided not to think too much about it, and just ask the obvious questions.

"But what circumstances could allow that to happen?"

"None, as far as I know. The other possibility, only slightly more reasonable, was that the device was somehow built within the living brain. That would explain the lack of scarring, and also the slightly compressed state of the surrounding tissue" but once again, the how escapes me. You need a scientist for this one, not a doctor."

"Hmm"

Yet more questions. True, this affair had at least yielded a possible way to put the Thorns down without application of excessive force, but questions without answers had the potential - and the tendency " to bite you from behind at the worst possible moment.

"

Hopefully the SPARTANs wouldn't add yet more mysteries to the ever growing pile"

###

#####_A Poor Start_#####

Archon " Sector 16, Lake shore (Southern side) (Archon occupation day 3, Mid-morning)

Having been on the move for the last two or three hours, with not the slightest sign of trouble, the Chief was starting to get more than a little concerned. You'd have thought something would have shown up to make his life more difficult, but every time he jumped at the moment, it was at nothing more than shadows. The motion tracker was no help " for some reason it frequently showed blips that, when investigated, turned out to be nothing at all. Which only made him wonder why these yellow and red blips kept showing up.

More anomalies. And you already know the standing opinion on them.

Silent as a Ghost " the spiritual kind, not the Covenant vehicle " he moved through the forest. Twenty metres away, a shallow pebble beach sloped down to the gently lapping waters of the great lake. The Chief could have kept to the open, but he was concerned with the regular Sentinel patrols floating past. The images of the canyon debacle were still fresh in his mind, and with his motion tracker on the blink, he was somewhat wary of giving the regional defence forces a reason to converge on him. Sure, the forest could have Thorns lying

in wait, but he already knew his MJOLNIR would hold it at bay long enough for the SPARTAN laser on his back to come into play. Of course, one had to deign to turn up first, and also of course, he'd rather it didn't bother.

There was a gurgling from the direction of the lake, and a series of ripples spread slowly outwards from some indeterminate point. As the Chief idly looked on, there was a puff of spray and a distant splash. And then, nothing. Whatever had caused the disturbance had moved on. The Chief did the same.

It was odd, he considered, how far less stimuli than these would often form the basis for long standing "monster in the lake" myths that _refused_ to die no matter how often they were proven false. The Loch Ness monster was one, and he'd also heard of a similar tale from Scandinavia. Storsjöodjuret, the beast had been called. _and_ how _on_ Earth _did_ he _remember_ _that_? Of all the random trivia that had shown up in his life, why had _that_ _one_ stuck in his mind? Talk about wrong priorities! The lack of companions was starting to get to him, letting his mind roam far beyond its _normal_ haunts.

Luckily for him, he wasn't going to be alone much longer.

As the SPARTAN rounded the latest little headland and espied the shining dome of his destination on the next headland across, he became aware of a faint electronic humming in his earpiece. A moment later and a burst of static, and he was suddenly the audience to a rather unfamiliar sounding voice.

"So as I was saying Capt- Where am I?"

The female voice went silent, as she analysed the situation. Startled but not alarmed, the Chief waited for his passenger to introduce herself.

She did not. She did the reverse!

"So then, introductions are in order. _Who_ are _you_ and _why_ have _I_ been _abducted_ like _this_?"

The Chief was already disliking Serina. But _he_ had to be diplomatic at the least.

"UNSC Spartan 117, John, rank of Master Chief. Why; Captain Cutter's request. You were offline, so he borrowed Cortana. He lent me your chip in return, just in case you woke up again."

"And why would I believe that? How do I know you weren't the reason I was _offline_ in the first place?"

Serina sounded _very_ _p__'__ed_ _off_. Understandable, but she wasn't of use to the mission in this state. So, rather than explain, the Chief gave a simple two word response.

"Mission logs."

.

"Fine, I'll check the forgeries. And if I'm not satisfied, be aware

that I am well versed in manipulating life support. A suit of MJOLNIR isn't that different from a ship mainframe."

Hopping across a line of boulders that flanked a narrow dirt track running down to the beach, the Chief darted from one patch of trees to the next. In the shadow of something somewhat similar to an ancient Oak, he paused and looked behind him, checking again that he wasn't being followed. No, still all clear. He continued on his course parallel to the water's edge. A small, five machine team of Enforcers took off from the surface of the dome and vectored off towards the northeast. Not that the Chief would have been too concerned if they'd stayed â€" he'd made sure to bring extra batteries for his SPARTAN laser this time. And he wasn't going to provoke them into opening fire anyway.

Serina's _taking _her _time _reviewing _the _mission _logs_â€| _The _captain _mentioned _she _had _a _few _quirks, _is _a _tendency _to _over-analyse _one _of _them? _Because _if _so, _she _could _be _a _liability _if _she _can_'_t _give _me _effective _tactical _advice _without _a _time_lag_.

"I should also warn you that I am versed in psychology; _I _know _what _you_'_re _thinking_! Ship entertainment would be so _lacking_ if I couldn't get into people's heads.

"â€|Not literally _primitive_, that would be a bit disgusting for an intelligence of my standard. Now stop thinking and let me get back to deciding your fate!"

"_Sorry_." muttered the Chief. He wasn't sorry in the slightest, but he could do without the AI's complaining. _Why _did _I _agree _to _this_?

There was the sudden smell of burning filtering into his helmet. One thing the MJOLNIR never seemed to filter out. It wasn't necessarily a bad thing, because it alerted the SPARTAN to the presence of a number of smoldering wrecks lying on the beach. Sentinels, internal circuitry still sparking from random discharges. The nearest was only a few metres from the tree line, so he decided to take a closer look. As his current weapon load was a SPARTAN laser and an MA5 assault rifle, he could theoretically carry something else, and there was _something_ he wouldn't mind.

A couple of glances up and down the beach, and another across the inlet at the dome, and he slid out. In the span of only a few seconds, he crouched, grasped the lower end of the wreckage, and pulled it back under the cover of the woods. One brief examination and a single yank later, and he was the proud owner of a still operational Sentinel beam; one of the more powerful versions carried by Sentinel Majors. The only snag was attaching the MA5 to the back of his MJOLNIR without removing the laser, but he managedâ€| barely. With that done, he continued onwards.

Just as he was rounding the tip of the inlet, Serina finally got back to him.

"Sheesh, _what _have _we _been _missing_? Either you've got the most disturbed mind around, or you might actually be telling the truth, as impossible as I find it. You know your AI left logs for

everything she's seen in your armour? Pity she was alert enough not to leave navigational data for Earth or the colonies, or I could have got her for breaching the Cole protocol. The Flood? Halo's Alpha and Delta, Unyielding Hierophant, High Charity and the Ark? 343 Guilty Spark? The Covenant splitting? All here! She didn't even try putting serious encryption on it, but then her personal log implied she didn't expect anyone else to be _shoehorned __in_. I could have done without seeing the files on her incarceration with that Gravemind though; even my tolerance has its limits."

"Satisfied?" asked the Chief.

"No. I still don't know that you were indeed authorised to carry me. There wasn't anything in her logs about-"

"And _my_ logs?"

â€|

"I was just getting around to checking them, thank you."

_She __forgot_.

"No, I didn't. Any more of that and I'll take control of the armour, turn around and take us back. Rightâ€| blah de blah, Dawn crashing, Pelican crashingâ€| _do __you __have __an __obsession __with __crashing __things_? No? Not the impression I'm getting. Patab, Melodious Cartographer, _Archon_? Well, at least when you get us killed I'll know where my grave marker will be. Thorn, Alchemistâ€| Oh. Okay, you were telling the truth. No actor could be _that_ good at impersonating the captain.

â€|

"Just what I needed, _another_ excuse to significantly drop my life expectancyâ€| "

The trees began to thin out, about the same time that the number of recently destroyed Sentinels began to rise.

The Chief walked out onto a graveyardâ€|

Bare soil, charred in places. A small rock outcrop thirty metres away was smoldering nicely, the occasional flame probing the air as another patch of vegetation caught ablaze. Wrecked Sentinels were scattered all over the place, the odd Enforcer mixed in. One was still operational, barely, and was gently rocking as the underside claw tried, unsuccessfully, to roll the machine upright. There was even the odd Thorn corpse.

Something crunched underfoot, and the Chief looked down to find the remains of a Constructor. A few more were visible, all horribly deformed. The Chief became horribly aware of how exposed he was, and raised his own Sentinel beam. He began to move as carefully as possible across the battlefield. Serina didn't comment, but he knew what she was thinking. _But __where __are __they __now_?

All of a sudden, there was a roar from the sky, neatly matched by a more animalistic roar from the side. A Thorn, fur drenched in ruby blood from a pair of _deep_ gashes in the side but still very much

mobile, lurched up from where it had been crouching. The Chief was close enough to stare right down the creature's wheezing gullet, when a rat-tat-tat noise signaled the arrival of a swarm of bullets, all targeted at the unfortunate beast. It keeled over with barely a noise, shredded to pieces.

The Chief was already rolling for cover, a downed Enforcer being in a convenient position. He dropped the Sentinel beam, reached behind and grabbed the SPARTAN laser. If that was what he thought it was, he needed all the firepower he could get. Sighting a handy gap in the Enforcer's cracked armour, he twisted to put his eye behind it.

Just in time to see the UNSC pelican coming in to land! For once, a _nice_ surprise! The Pelican settled nose away, allowing one of the five passengers to hop out. Even without the HUD tag, the Chief instinctively knew he'd just been reinforced by a fellow SPARTAN, Douglas 042 to be precise. The other SPARTAN II turned and waved to the marines still on board, one of which turned to bellow something towards the pilot's compartment. The roar of the engines made it impossible to hear just what, but the meaning became clear when the Pelican dusted off and began climbing steadily away. The marine squad looked more than a little relieved.

Tina Maloski's voice broke through on the radio. "_Whiskey __three-ninety __nine __to __SPARTANs, __we__'__ll __find __a __nice __quiet __spot __on __one __of __those __islands __and __dig __in. __Call __us __when __you __need __a __lift __back!_"

"Acknowledged, Arctic Claw." came Douglas's voice in reply. As the Pelican began to accelerate towards the lake, he heaved his odd looking rocket launcher onto his shoulder, and moved to join the Chief.

"Good to see you, John. Next time, don't take off in the middle of the night like that. Being a lone wolf may be good for a sniper, but that was Linda's specialty, not yours as far as I remember."

"I felt you would be needed by the Captain."

"Well, he thought otherwise. It helps that your AI ran simulations and proved that strategic use of snipers and rocket launchers would be more than enough to defend the base for a while." He looked around at the carnage. "You've been busy, haven't you?"

The Chief was about to admit that actually, he hadn't been responsible for _this_ one, but Serina butted in first.

"Ah good, Douglas. I trust you a lot more than I trust this primitive of a newcomer, could you-"

"Negative ma'am. The captain entrusted you to the Master Chief, and as the ranking officer he has the most chance of surviving to return you back to base."

Serina shut up, but the Chief could sense her going back into Cortana's files and checking for flaws. And sure enoughâ€¦

"But he relies so much on simple chance. Am I supposed to be put at the whim of some celestial god playing a game of dice? I might as well go find a Ragnarok virus now and save myself the misery of

waiting."

Douglas gave the Chief a sympathising glance, before responding again.

"Again, negative ma'am. You may outrank me, but unless the ranking system has changed in the last twenty five years, the captain still outranks you â€" and there was nothing in my orders that could be considered a countermanding of his orders to the Master Chief."

Serina grumbled, but gave up. Even though she hadn't exactly followed SPARTANS around at ground level before, she was well aware that they would never give an inch on matters relating to the reinterpretation of orders. There had been an incident back in training, when John had taken the view that there were only three kinds of people in military life â€" comrades, superiors and enemies â€" and followed it literally. Said incident had led to one ODS killed, and the other three unconscious and gibbering wrecks for the rest of their lives. Yes, they had been out of uniform, but that hadn't been his fault. Nor had their conduct.

The two SPARTANS didn't exchange any further pleasantries, merely choosing to begin advancing over the barren earth towards the dome, now uncomfortably close. As they advanced in carefully planned increments, leap frogging their way forward, the three of them began to try and make some sense of the vast structure.

The dome was, for the most part, unblemished. About halfway up a number of Sentinel access ports were arranged in a ring stretching around the entire circumference of the structure; large enough to take Enforcers as well. Down towards the ground, a few beam turrets could be seen, flanking the only visible entrance. The very tip of the dome meanwhile, was capped by a trio of satellite dishes â€" although, what satellites are they supposed to contact? Neither Cortana nor Serina noticed any from orbitâ€|

Beyond that, the only real point of note was the dome's size â€" a good half a kilometre tall by the Chief's estimate.

"Arctic Claw to SPARTANS; just to let you know we 've spotted a second entrance on the far side of the structure from the drop off pointâ€| and we 're going to keep radio communication to a minimum from here on. We 've noticed a correlation between amount of radio chatter, and number of Sentinels paying a visit. They haven 't done anything more than look, but we don 't want more attention than we can help. Arctic Claw out."

As they got closer still, another group of Sentinels emerged from one of the dome access ports. This group maintained a safe altitude above the SPARTANS, but still took a long loop of a flight path that would allow them to look straight down on the two from above. Then, like the Enforcers before them, they veered off northwards.

"Normally I wouldn't say this," mentioned Serina in Douglas's direction (using the MJOLNIR loudspeakers), "but I think our marines were the problem back at the ravine. Did you notice how they were the

ones to fire first?"

"Yes ma'am, but they were being threatened at the time. The Enforcer looked pretty hostile to me."

"Oh sure, put the gung-ho marines in the right. Only to be expected I suppose, you are one of themâ€¦ in a manner of speaking anyway."

The Chief knew the lack of response to that one was because SPARTANS were notoriously difficult to bait. So he took the opportunity to make his own observation.

"From the images I would have said the machine was deliberately provoking the marines into firing first-"

"Except, primitive, that sort of behaviour is beyond machines like those. Even you should have the brain power to work that one outâ€¦ unless I've seriously overestimated you. Not something I normally do, but even I make mistakesâ€¦"

_I __don__'__t __think __she __likes __me_.

"No, I don't. I never asked to be dragged along on _your_ mission, stuck in _your_ head. I'm normally found in a starship, not squeezed into this tiny bit of defenceless scrap sharing it with a primordial ignoramus! And you wonder why I'm having a bad day?"

Douglas gave a subtle gesture to indicate "kill earpieces". Grinning, the Chief did so. But he stopped grinning when Serina _turned __them __back __on_. And promptly started berating him. Groaning, he gave up, mentally blocked her out and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

The dome was very much up close and personal by now. The turrets guarding the door were, like the Sentinels, being ominously uninterested in the two super soldiers marching towards them. At least, that's how it seemed at first. But then, it became clear that even if they weren't firing, they _were_ tracking to keep the SPARTANS in view. Douglas readied his four barreled rocket launcher, but didn't open fire. He'd apparently come to the conclusion that deliberately starting things wasn't the best way to go. He didn't have the advantage of the Chief's energy shieldi- was that a Kig-Yar point defence gauntlet on his wrist? Well, it was a least a partial fix to the problemâ€¦

The two SPARTANS finally reached the dome. One last pile of Sentinels to clamber over, and they arrived at the door â€" a small affair clearly meant for personnel and Sentinels â€" not vehicles or Enforcers. A brief glance to check the hallway was clear, and they moved in.

###

#####_Dead Man Talking_#####

Archon â€" Sector 16, South East of Melodious Cartographer facility (Archon occupation day 3, Mid-day)

"So, conclusion?"

Alice 130 looked up from her investigation. She took one last look around at the marine squad, and gave her verdict.

"I'd say they were dead."

This was not news to the marine next to her. Nor would the other marines had been surprised to learn this fact. Probably upset, but not surprised. When a head had that many gashes through it, you'd be concerned if it was. For several reasons.

The two SPARTAN II's were currently crouching in a rocky ravine cutting through the heart of the ancient woodland. They'd had an interesting trip so far. They'd found the remains of John's Pelican, seen a flock of birds with rather full looking stomachs, and then the lost marine team. What was left of them.

The two Warthogs were no longer useable. One had apparently rammed quite a large boulder, and the other had crashed right into the back of the first. Someone must have been asleep at the wheel. But why were the bodies of the eight marines relatively untouched? â€|Not counting the shredded heads. Something around here was very fussy about what it ate.

Jerome 092 sighed at his comrade's out of place humour, and went back to rooting around the perimeter of the crash site. Finally, he hit pay dirt!

"Well, in place of your meticulously crafted analysis, I think I'll just take a first person account."

"Huh?"

Alice looked up again, to see Jerome holding up a standard issue marine helmet. A standard issue marine helmet with an attached camera and memory chip.

"Oh. Well, I guess you found it, you can go first."

Jerome was slightly surprised at her generosity, until he realised that whatever was on the chipâ€| was probably pretty gruesome. And that she'd prefer a little warning of just what to brace her stomach against. Jerome was suddenly struggling against the urge to say "ladies first". But seeing as the usual response was "age before beauty"â€|

He gripped for the chip in the back of the helmet, pulled it out and inserted it into the waiting receptacle in his own helmet.

-ACCESS MISSION LOG â€" UNSC PRIVATE FIRST CLASS B. SPEAR

-DATE UNAVAILABLE. SELECT VIEWING PERIOD BY CONFIRMING ELAPSED MISSION TIME.

-[PLAY: MISSION TIME ELAPSED â€" 0.05]

The view was from the Warthog's gunner, as the rear vehicle jolted down towards the ford of Alpha base's eastern approach. It wheeled past a small group of personnel â€" presumably friends of the Scout Team's marines, judging by the excessive waving as the Warthogs rolled past. One of them, a short woman in a navy tech's uniform,

started jogging alongside.

"So, bringing me back something nice from your hunting trip?" she asked, a grin on her roundish face.

"Maybe. How'd ya like a Thorn head for your tent wall?" (Jerome assumed it was Spear responding â€" the other marine was visible was smirking but keeping his mouth shut).

She gave a brief smile. "Well, if it wouldn't be too much-"

-[FFW]

Not really Jerome's business, that. He knew someone was going to have to give the tech the bad news, but his duty right now was to find out just what had wiped the team out. Listening to flirting was something entirely different, and thus irrelevant.

-[PLAY: MISSION TIME ELAPSED â€" 0.30]

Now the Warthogs were trundling across a grassy plain, leaving long trails of bruised grass in their wake.

"I don't like the looks of those birds. Hey, Spear, fancy a little target practice?"

Spear looked down the multiple barrels of the LAAG at the circling avians, before leaning back with a sigh.

"No good lieutenant, out of range. I'm sure they're harmless."

"On this rock? I might consider trying the woodland route back. Thorns are one thing, death from above is quite another."

"With all due respect lieutenant, you're being paranoid."

"No, you're being blasÃ©."

-[FFW]

Didn't the marines do an awful lot of trash talk? You almost had to wonder how they managed to catch anything off guardâ€|

-[PLAY: MISSION TIME ELAPSED â€" 1.30]

"There's the Melodious Cartographer. Halfway there chaps!"

Grumbling all round. There was however, one particularly noticeable comment.

"Thanks for spoiling my fun lieutenant. I was just about to ask "are we there yet"?"

"I know."

-[FFW] â€| [PLAY: MISSION TIME ELAPSED â€" 2.30]

The narrow road paralleled a raging forest river, water all but bouncing across the many boulders sitting midstream. For once, no-one

was talking.

-[FFW] â€| [PLAY: MISSION TIME ELAPSED â€" 3.00]

The rim of a pine green water bottle filled half of the camera's view, with Jerome also being forced to listen to the unpleasant sound of "Glug glug glug". Eventually, the audio assault came to an end and the bottle dropped from sight, allowing the SPARTAN to see the small woodland clearing the team had stalled in. Over in the other Hog, a raging argument was underway â€" the subject apparently being who was responsible for getting the team lost. The woman looked like she was winningâ€|

A movement from the side drew Spear's (and by extension, Jerome's) eyes. The other marine in the back of Spear's Hog held up a sheet of paper, on which a certain headscratcher was scrawled.

Isn'__t __it __usually __the __women __who __get __**us
**__lost_?

-[FFW]

Attempting to avoid wasting any more time, Jerome scrolled on, a couple of hours this time.

-[PLAY: MISSION TIME ELAPSED â€" 6.00]

A twisted hulk lay in front of the camera, with the two Warthogs gradually traversing the great scar the _Dawn_'s remains had scoured into the landscape. The marines were uncharacteristically quiet as they watched the ship get slowly closer.

-[FFW]

The timer inexplicably jumped much further than Jerome intended, but as the marines were clearly still alive, he decided not to rewind.

-[PLAY: MISSION TIME ELAPSED â€" 7.57]

A marine in front of the camera kicked the cabin door in, and shone his flashlight inside. "Nope, empty. Quite a large gash in the other wall though."

"I'm telling you I heard something!"

"Yeah, whatever mate. Sure it wasn't interference through your earpieces?"

"Of course I'm sure! Otherwise you'd have heard it too!"

The other marine shook his head. "Glitchy equipment mate, happens all the time." He began moving along to the next buckled door. "So far we've turned up squat. Reckon the others are having better luck?"

Spear looked around. Disaster area didn't even _begin_ to cover the amount of damage the ship had taken â€" both of the corridors visible were at least partially caved in, possibly outright destroyed; the electronics were almost completely out â€" but for a single barely

functioning terminal that looked as if something had been into it recently, and only a scant few emergency lights still flickering away. The only sounds came from the creaking of the metal surrounding themâ€| and a faint whine.

"There it is again!"

The other marine glanced around, flashing his light into some of the more obvious shadows. After a moment he scowled and lowered it, illuminating the crumpled deck but not much else.

"Listen mate, I respect your senses as much as the next man, but to quote the lieutenant; you're just being par-"

All of a sudden he snapped his MA5 assault rifle back up.

"Okay, I heard that!"

As Spear began looking around wildly, a strange noise came over Jerome's earpieces. This wasn't the whining sound from before â€" no, this was something much more intriguing. This, was the pattering sound of what could only be imagined as many tiny metal feetâ€|

-[ERROR 12 â€" DATA CORRUPTED. AUTO FFW TO UNCORRUPTED DATA]

Great. Just when it was getting interesting. But there was nothing Jerome could do about it now. Maybe the techs back at Alpha Base could repair the data laterâ€|

-[PLAY: MISSION TIME ELAPSED â€" 8.33]

The camera feed was jolting and bouncing like mad, as Spear and his companion pounded along the blackened corridor at speeds far greater than safety would have allowed. But for the two marines it didn't seem to matter; they seemed to have been blessed with a complete inability to stumble or trip.

"Howâ€| muchâ€| further?" wheezed Spear, glancing into a shadowy side corridor as they stormed past. Ahead, the other marine vaulted over a fallen section of piping, and surged onwards. Spear followed his comrade's example, landing in a small puddle of water but too winded to complain.

"Twoâ€| moreâ€| corridors." responded the other marine, just as out of breath. "Whereâ€| areâ€| they?"

Jerome wanted to know as well; he couldn't hear any anomalous sounds on the recording, butâ€|

"Typicalâ€| lieutenantâ€| behaviourâ€| recallingâ€| usâ€| un-necessarilyâ€| early!"

-[FFW]

Okay, not what he was expecting. But why had the lieutenant recalled them? Skipping a couple of minutes would be enough.

-[PLAY: MISSION TIME ELAPSED â€" 8.36]

The recording resumed just as the camera was refocusing, adjusting to a sudden influx of bright light. The two marines burst from a jagged gash in the side of the hulking derelict, straight into the glare of a setting sun. They kept on going, getting a reasonable distance between themselves and the hull, before wheeling and pointing shakily held MA5's at their exit hole. In the near distance, the roar of rapidly approaching Warthogs " quickly giving way to the screeching of tyres.

"Happy boys? Finished pretending the combined fury of Heaven and Hell is after you?"

Spear's head snapped round just long enough to see the pair of Hog drivers walking in their direction, before returning to it's watch of the wounded hull. His comrade didn't even do that.

"Yeesh, giving me the silent treatment are yo- oh, hey lieutenant!"

The other pair of marines charged from the wreckage, with almost as little regard for safety as Spear's own exit had shown. They did stumble, but failed to make a laughing stock of themselves and actually fall over.

"Hey up, slow down you two!"

The lieutenant did no such thing, and neither did Scout Team Bravo's only female member. They continued tripping their way over to the parked vehicles, where they finally paused, gasping for breath.

"So, find anything interesting?" asked one of the Warthog gunners.

"No." answered the lieutenant's companion, the first to recover her breath. "But we thought it would be best to get out of there. We need more people, safety in numbers."

"Why, the ghosts getting to you were they?"

She gave a death glare to the unfortunate marine, but was prevented from verbally exploding by the lieutenant, who was quick to voice his own observations.

"There's something on that ship. Weâ€| heard #####*#####* shadows, following us ar*#####*#####* at entrance woun*##### som*##### burned it *#####

-[ERROR 12 " DATA CORRUPTED. AUTO FFW TO UNCORRUPTED DATA.]

Not again!

-[PLAY: MISSION TIME ELAPSED " 11.13]

It was dark. The Warthogs were just cruising their way down into a narrow, wooded ravine. Jerome felt his heartbeat pick up " he recognised the details being picked out by the powerful vehicle headlights. The marines were jumpy, eyes darting all over the place. Someone was incoherently gibbering; the marine squished in the back with Spear was visibly muttering " the words "just another hour, just another hour" being repeated over and over.

And thenâ€¦|

"_RhaaaAAEEEEEEe!__"__

Sudden screaming broke out, as a huge shadow plummeted into the ravine, straight onto the head of the driver in the first Hog. The vehicle went out of control, slewed sideways and hit a rock, spilling its passengers and the shadow onto the ground. Then the second Hog slammed into the first, catapulting Spear through the air with deadly momentum. As the marine came back to ground, there was a sickening crack, the sound of breaking bones. A high pitched tone sounded, the portent of the marine's imminent demise.

The camera was left facing the centre of the ravine, more shadows dropping from the sky. There was a small amount of sporadic gunfire, muzzle flashes in the dark, accompanied by more animal screams blending in with those of the humans, as the last of the marines began to die.

The camera feed jolted, and went dark.

-[RECORDING TERMINATED â€" POSSIBLE CAUSES: WND/INCAP/KIA?]

Jerome pulled the chip from his helmet, and shuddered. Alice came closer and stared at the chip, held in a faintly trembling hand. Even SPARTANS could be scared, and nothing does that quite like watching someone die from a first person perspective.

"We should get out of here." he announced.

"Agreed," she responded, looking around. The forest suddenly seemed a lot more threatening. "What happened to them?"

"Death from aboveâ€¦|"

###

#####_Invasions Of Privacy_#####

Archon â€" Sector 16, Unidentified facility on south side of primary sector lake (Archon occupation day 3 â€" Mid afternoon)

The Chief was starting to get frustrated, as he prowled the depths of the dome. The Sentinel beam held firmly in both hands was starting to wear him down, but he wasn't going to drop it, not when he needed every bit of firepower he could muster.

Ever since they'd entered the structure, things had started going wrong. The first problem had been the deactivated energy bridge spanning a deep chasm between maintenance passageways and a broad, important looking gallery lined with large capsules. Serina had found the hard light generator for them, but _then_ it transpired that the bridge would only remain active for periods longer than ten seconds â€" somewhat less than the amount of time required to cross â€" if someone remained at the control panel and kept jolting the system. The Chief had been elected to cross, much to Serina's horror, and even more so when they reached the other side and found a second control panel distinctly lacking. Rather than give up and leave none the wiser, Douglas had stomped off to find another way in.

Which meant that Serina was once again the Chief's sole companion. She'd since kept herself amused by dipping into Cortana's logs and finding every possible fault in his past actions. Speaking of whichâ€¦

"Oh, I just found the MJOLNIR's own records!

â€¦

"Another low orbit sky dive? Is that your first response to everything, leap before you think? How you haven't gone splat yet is beyond meâ€¦ your head must be tougher than I thought!"

The Chief gave the next capsule a slight tap, and moved on. So far the general response, no matter what he did, was nothing at all. Still, at least the metal eggs hadn't hatched anything nasty onto him, but he'd still have felt safer knowing what was in them. Forewarned was fore prepared after all.

"Well, seems like I've exhausted your records for now; let's see what your AI was up toâ€¦"

If the Chief hadn't already experienced a good deal more of Serina's metaphysical mouth than he'd have liked, he would have told her to keep her nose out of other people's business. Checking up on him was bad enough â€" although it was true that she needed to know what he'd been facing and how he was most likely to act if things went pear shaped â€" but the term "personal business" seemed to mean nothing to her.

Trying to take his mind off the AI turning the MJOLNIR's electronics inside out, he had another look at his surroundings.

After they'd cleared the entrance corridor through the outer layer of the dome â€" a 10 metre thick plate of heavy duty armour â€" and the subsequent maintenance passageways, they'd emerged into a wide gallery. Douglas had been left behind at this point, due to the aforementioned bridge issue, and so the long, gently curving gallery that appeared to circumnavigate the entire dome was currently the Chief's stomping ground alone. The central walkway â€" which they were following in a clockwise direction â€" was wide enough for three Warthogs to drive side by side, and was mostly bordered by a pair of ravines with no noticeable bottom. Occasionally, it stretched out and reached the outer wall, where the anomalous capsules could be found â€" linked to some sort of rail transport system. The inner wall of the gallery housed long windows at regular intervals, providing panoramic views ofâ€¦ another chasm. The other side was visible, but as it consisted of a single blank face of metal, there was no gauging what lay beyond without a lot of speculation.

Another capsule, another tap.

"If I had brain cells, they'd be dying of boredom. Keep moving and leave those things for the experts to figure out."

The Chief couldn't stop himself; his mouth moved completely on its own volition.

"So, expert, what are they then?"

"One â€" drop the sarcasm, it doesn't fit you. Two â€" incubation pods. All inactive â€" no IR readings."

"Okay, and how do you know that?"

Serina sounded p'd off at the unspoken suggestion that she was "guessing".

"Forerunner maintenance plans. The main system's blocked, but a few of the Constructors trying to keep out of sight are carrying schematics. Your AI's habit of barging into every network she could find has some advantages, and she was kind enough to leave the records of "how". I must say, that was an ingenious back door she found to the password issue. Pity it opened her up to all sorts of Trojan viruses and countermeasures, but then only a first class AI such as myself would be ready to guard against such traps."

The Chief audibly groaned, and moved on.

"Chief! I've got company!"

Douglas' voice ricocheted across the comm. Punctuated by the sound of rhythmic thumping â€" possibly something heavy stomping around. Then the channel cut out, leaving the Chief and Serina with no company but for echoes. Serina quickly tried to re-establish contact.

"Douglas? SPARTAN 042, respond!"

Silence from the radio. The Chief made his own contribution, using a wide spectrum one way signal.

"Douglas, give the usual all clear as soon as you are able." He set the comm. to pulse the message every thirty seconds.

"I'm sure he'll be fine." he commented.

"For once, you may be right. His skills, I have confidence in."

She went silentâ€" only to make a comment that at first seemed completely random.

"Do you get the feeling we're being watched? Primitives have better instincts than intellectuals, soâ€" |"

Come to think of it, the Chief did. But he couldn't work out where fromâ€" until he noticed that one of the blue lights in the ceiling was emitting a red glow. And in typical Serina behaviour, the AI piped up first and trounced him!

"There it is, hiding behind that bulb. Come __out, __you __sorry __excuse __for __a __spy_!"

The watcher complied. It slid out from its insufficient cover, and continued staring with tireless red eye. The Chief tightened his grip on the Sentinel beam; he knew what that colour meant. Rampant AI were becoming all too common of late.

The Monitor watched some more, before suddenly breaking its self

imposed silence.

"_The __storm __will __break __across __the __rocks, __a __hallowed
__light __struggles __to __stay __aloft._"

_Down __it __must __fall, __knocked __astray, __but __who __gives
__the __nudge, __that __sends __it __on __its __way?_"

â€|

"I'm sorry?"

A first! Serina was confused! The Monitor's next contribution seemed more straight forward.

"_A __double __edged __sword, __words __can __be, __hiding __true
__meaning, __even __from __me._"

_One __will __sink, __all __too __low, __beware __the __one, __to
__twist __words __so._"

â€|

"Yeah, sure, we'll do that. Just one question â€" why tell us to watch _you?_"

The Monitor looked somewhat blankâ€| although maybe that wasn't _quite_ the right term â€" it didn't exactly have expressions, did it? And its shiny metal "face" was _always_ blank. But regardless, it still gave a convincing impression of being confused. Probably wasn't programmed to deal with Serina's unique brand of witâ€| but its programming was up the wall in any caseâ€|

And speaking of which, the mechanical miscreant skimmed across the ceiling, and dived into a transport conduit. And as it did so, the Chief's motion tracker glitched again, a trail of ghost images tracing the Monitor's path. Serina took offence.

"That's it, run away from the inconvenient questions! Speaking in riddles, lurking around listening â€" right little politician aren't you! â€| And primitive, what's up with your equipment? No, don't answer, I'll check for myself!"

The Chief wouldn't have bothered speaking even if she _had_ given him the chance. He knew the score â€" any "conversation" with her was one sided. Why hadn't the captain warned him about this? Or was it that he hadn't known? Did she only show this side of her personality to those she considered her "inferiors"?

"Yeek, there's a lot of bugs in here! You _like_ living inside a termite mound? Fixing all of them would be beneath me, so I'll leave it at fumigating the motion trackerâ€|"

"Thank you."

"No problem, I'll send you the bill later."

The Chief snorted. _She __can__'__t __be __serious_!

"Keep laughing, it'll be all the more amusing to see your reaction

when it _does_ show up."

_She __**is __serious_! And simultaneous to the realisation, the motion tracker disappeared with a hint of finality.

The gallery continued to curve slowly around, with little to break the monotony. Still, at least Serina was now occupied doing something _other_ than moaning the Chief's ear off. Not that all was silent though. A passing whine drew his attention to the rift to his left, just in time to observe a pair of Sentinels cruise past half a metre below his boots. A third followed in their wake, but unlike the first, this one stopped for a momentary gander. The Chief mentally prepared to fire his own beam weapon, but his caution proved unnecessary, and the machine moved on.

This time, the Chief _was_ left with a distinct sense of unease at having got off so lightly. He refused to move again, until he was sure they had really gone, and were not simply lurking round the corner, ready for a potshot. His concern mounted when he noticed a quintet of Constructors shadow him the length of the next gallery window, keeping careful pace with him on the other side of the glass.

"Serina," he growled, "that motion tracker would be useful around about now."

"Working on it, primitive. If you want it done faster, it will be a bodge job at best, and I'll add miscellaneous charges for being rushed. If you must blame someone, blame your AI for leaving an incomplete predictor subroutine entwined with the program like a Gordian knot. I can almost theorise that she did it on purpose."

Thankfully she left the rest of her rant hanging, allowing the Chief to notice the Sentinels passing again in the opposite direction. True, they could have been a completely different trio, but somehow he doubted it. At the moment he wanted nothing less than to get out of the gallery, and into somewhere the intrusive machines couldn't just be "passing by". So, he was pleasantly surprised when the gallery ended at a large security door. And even more so when the associated control panel opened up without a hitch, revealing a fairly large, rectangular room inside. Just for peace of mind, the moment he was through he sealed the door behind him "even though he knew that the Sentinels could easily get in if they really wanted to. It _was_ their turf.

The room was, at first glance, interesting but not _that_ interesting. Another security door directly opposite the Chief's ingress point signaled a continuation of the never-ending gallery, while a similar door to the right offered an exit into the huge void that had lined the gallery's inside wall. There were a pair of iris hatches allowing the capsule rail system entry, and an offshoot of _that_ veered to the left, where three metal cocoons lined the far wall "the centre most one inhabiting a large alcove otherwise filled with convoluted silver machinery. Some of it looked familiar"

The Chief stomped over. Yes, a small part of the equipment resembled that found back in the Alchemist, but the rest suggested a more complicated purpose than "mere" replication. There was no control

panel here, but a familiar niche for scanning "samples" _was_ present.

On an impulse, the Chief grasped the SPARTAN laser on his back, and dropped it into the waiting slot. As expected, the familiar hazy green light appeared, and vanished. But, _not_ as expected, nothing else happenedâ€| until the computer's voice started reeling off a library's worth of information.

"Scan complete, relevant data saved to memory. One trace detected â€" faint. Origin â€" Erde-Tyrene, sample traits indicate equatorial region. Sample estimated at four years of age. Warning â€" due to age of sample, processing may result in enhanced number of imperfections. Proceed anyway?"

_What? _I _know _this _was _Johnson_'_s _weapon, _but _its _condition _is _just _as _good _as _those _MA5_'_s.
What'_s _the _problem_?

The motion tracker suddenly reappeared, blip freeâ€| for now.

"Right, I've removed the glitchy subroutine, although it might be worth working on it later â€" it shows unexpected promise andâ€|
what are you doing?"

â€|

"Right primitive, pick up the weapon and _back _off_. Leave the smart business to the _smart _people_. I might be gracious and let you deal with our guest though."

What? The Chief whipped round, coming face to face with the blasted automaton that had _quietly _crept _up _on _him_. The Monitor was back.

â€|or maybe it wasn't the same one. This one had a _blue_ "eye", and while AI's going rampant was easy enough to understand â€" especially with ones that were eons old ones â€" going the other way? Not so likely.

"And what do _you_ want?" he growled, something he seemed to be doing an awful lot of late. The Monitor jerked back.

"_Such _vehemence_!" it commented. "_I _come _to _give _a _friendly _warning, _and _**that **_is _the _response _I _am _greeted _with? Most uncalled for! _Sometimes _I _wonder _why _I _bothered _breaking _my _programming._"

"What warning?"

"_Simply _put, _beware _the _Tempest_."

The Chief waited, but the Monitor remained (metaphorically) tight lipped on the rest of the matter. Serina took the initiative.

"Funny, we had another one here a few minutes back saying much the same thing."

"_Another_â€| _one? _Oh, _Nocturne _must _have _already

__spoken __to __you. __**What **__did __he __say_?"

"Not a lot, unless you count a small load of gibberish."

"_Gibberish? __Sounds __about __right, __but __**what **__**exactly**__â€| __no, __wait, __I__'__ll __ask __him __myself_."

The blue eye dimmed as the intelligence projected its thoughts elsewhere. It began holding a one sided conversation, presumably over whatever its analogue for the radio was, spinning slightly as it did so.

"_Nocturne? __Did __you __preempt __me __on __that __little __matter_?"

â€|

"_You __know, __sometimes __your __mode __of __speech __is __**really **__**annoying. __A __simple __yes __or __no __would __suffice. __What __did __you __say __to __them_?"

â€|

"_Convolutèd __as __always, __but __it __should __have __done __the __job__â€| __No __Nocturne, __you__'__ve __had __your __turn._"

â€|

"_Later, __Nocturne, __later_."

â€|

The Monitor shut up for a moment, before turning and planting the Chief back into the centre of its field of vision.

"_Right, __you__'__ve __apparently __had __all __of __the __warning __we __can __give __without __exposing __ourselves. __The __rest __is __up __to __you_."

It began floating backwards, accelerating.

"Wait __just __a __minute-_"

The Monitor ignored Serina, and flashed into yet another handy transport conduit.

"Okay, that little trick is really starting to get old!"

The Chief shrugged. The behaviour of the Monitors around here intrigued him, but their "advice" could hardly apply right now. What was this "Tempest" anyway? How could he be aware of it if he didn't even know what it was?

â€|

Oh well, maybe it would become clearer later on. He looked back at the alcove in front of him, and reached outâ€|

"Don't. Find something else to play with â€" I don't trust that equipment. It justâ€" seems unnatural."

_Fine. __So __do __I __choose __more __of __the __gallery __to __nowhere, __or __try __my __luck __with __the __third __door_?

"Door number three would be nice."

How _did_ she know what he was thinking? Was she really an expert at psychology, or was she _really __capable __of __mind __reading_?"

â€"

Didn't Dr. Halsey say something just before I received Cortana for the first time? Something about an AI occupying the interface between brain and machine? And that it was **possible** the AI would be **inhabiting ****part ****of ****my ****brain**?

â€"

_Oh, noâ€" _

###

Archon, Sector 16, Alpha Base (Archon occupation Day 3 â€" Mid afternoon)

It seemed to be a day for shocking realisations. Cortana was having one as well. As she flitted about inside the sorely limited system of the captain's portable terminal, she slowly came to a single, painful conclusionâ€"

The Chief had _left __her_. Worse, he had gone off with _another __AI_. What had she been _thinking_, agreeing to this? Who knew what sick, seductive words she was filling his mind with?

â€"

She had to _do __something_! But what? Stuck in this tiny device, what _could __she __do_? And then, the fragments of an almost insane plan coalesced in her unstable mind. Linking herself to the comm., she cast out a single word.

â€"

"_Come_."

###

Archon â€" Sector 16, Unidentified facility on south side of primary sector lake (Archon occupation day 3 â€" Mid afternoon)

"Watch you step, primitive. Did that reverse oxygen rush _really_ do this much to you? I'm impressed! (cough, cough,)"

The Chief wasn't. True, he had been surprised by the vacuum they'd just walked into, but his helmet had been enough to stop any serious

adverse affects. And there was no reason to berate him about the width of this energy bridge â€" it was admittedly narrower than the last, but still wide enough to be fairly safe.

"Sure it is. Just remember, there's two of us in here."

The true structure of the facility had now become apparent. It wasn't one dome, but two, the second sitting within the first â€" but held separate by a dividing void â€" a vacuum. It gave the impression that the interior dome was a vault, or perhapsâ€¦ a prison.

All of a sudden, the Chief had an awful suspicion that he knew what was inside. At least this time there seemed to be a good defensive measure this time â€" only machines and suitably protected individuals could pass between the two domes.

The bridge ended at another airlock, which yielded to Serina's probing touch all too easily. As they waited for the air to be pumped in, the AI made a comment that somehow made the level of tension even higher.

"If I'm reading your records right, and I am, Monitors are supposed to hold absolute power over their individual dominions. So what could be so dire as to get two of them to go out of their way to warn us?"

The airlock pressurised, allowing the inner door to slide open with a soft hiss. A dimly lit spherical vault was revealed, lined all around with large, heavy looking, slightly transparent hatches. It was cold, the chill penetrating even the MJOLNIR.

"And if the second one is to be believed, they were worried about being caught. But who by?"

The Chief walked out onto the circular walkway clinging to the walls. Another three airlocks were visible on the same level; possible egress points if things got hairy. Other levels â€" the same as the first but smaller â€" filled out the chamber above and below. All in all, the Chief counted about three hundred of the hatches.

He slowly walked over to one, choosing it at random. A gauntleted hand gently touched the cover, and wiped away the condensation.

â€¦And he recoiled. A creature born of darkest nightmare slumbered within, all too nearly larger than its cell. The monstrosity was twice as tall as the SPARTAN, possessing two fearsome looking tentacles in place of arms. Its putrid flesh was visibly oozingâ€¦ something, and near the top of the unbelievably stocky, headless torso, was an all too familiar sightâ€¦ twitching slightly.

"What is it?" gasped Serina in quiet, eerily fascinated horror.

"The Flood." The Chief let absolutely no flicker of emotion enter his voice, despite the feeling of dread inside. Back on the Ark, he'd thought he might have finally seen the last of these abominations, and yet every time he turned around another batch showed up. Why in the name of sanity had the Forerunners kept so many samples to

study? If they had truly sought to destroy the race that had brought them down, why did they insist on risking future generations so?

"Soâ€¦ the captain was right to destroy that world. I can sense the untamed, unharnessed malevolence oozing from this creature. But what is it? All of the records I've seen show nothing of thi-

The being in the tank twitched and spasmed, causing the Chief to recoil again. He didn't know how, but he just knew the creature was aware of him. This was a fight he really didn't want to have to take, but he had an unshakeable feeling that he would have no choice in the matter.

The Flood form calmed slightly, but continued giving the impression that it was watching him. He backed off further, watching back, until he remembered the walkway's edge behind him. He took his mind off the creature for a split second to checkâ€¦

And jumped back towards it as another Monitor, purple eye blazing, descended from above and accompanied by a pack of Sentinels.

"_Greetings! __I __am __59point29 __Mercurial __Wisdom. __I __am __the __Monitor __of __Installation __R-03!_"

###

****Authors Notes****

Okay, if you normally skip the AN's, please at least read the first paragraph. It will avoid confusion later on.

Advance warning â€" I'll be changing the story summary when I update next time. This is because I've advanced enough that the new summary will not really be a serious spoiler. The new summary will read:

Wisdom is a fickle thing, Quick to turn, and the "truth" can sting. Of its quirks, beware ye all, Or no longer will you be standing tall. It watches the clouds, and sends out a call, but agendas are manyâ€¦ and so, do perfect plans fallâ€¦

Hopefully that will get you thinking a little while I work on the next chapter.

I acknowledge that everyone probably saw the Flood coming. I'm sure I dropped enough hints. It's a common twist in Halo stories, which is why I'll be trying something new with them later on. The Flood form seen here is the cut Halo 2 Juggernaut, a worthy starting foe. Plus, seeing as I have no confirmed canonical evidence on what the Forerunners actually look like (that I trust), I can't exactly use the bog standard Combat and Carrier forms without claiming that other human or Covenant came earlier. Which I'd rather not.

The reason this chapter is so long, and why I keep adding things in general, is my method of planning. I start out with a number of key story points that I will visit, and general ideas for the bits between. The actual details however, are not narrowed down until I get close to actually writing it. As such, the theorised plot is

flexible, but gets less so as I enter more threads in these early stages. I originally didn't plan on the Fated Opportunity section, and the video log was supposed to be much shorter, so things clearly change. Hopefully for the better.

I'm aware I make mistakes when I upload, some always seem to get past me, and they're corrected later (the previous chapter has now been repaired). Hopefully I've managed to avoid making too many for this one. So if this story jumps back to the top without any new content being added, it's not me trying to promote the thing, its just me correcting any errors that I've spotted since uploading.

For those who want to check the little reference to an AI possibly inhabiting parts of the brain, check the novel Halo - The Fall of Reach, pages 252 and 253.

And a Magpie is a black and white bird - a member of the crow family, with a penchant for pinching gold and other shiny objects.

Final note for now " keep an eye on the way I word things. I'll regularly drop foreshadowing and possible even future spoilers, but you'll have to be on the ball to find them.

-Next phase: Wisdom is a fickle thing"

6. Phase 6: Wisdom is a Fickle Thing

****Halo Genetics****

A/N: Getting bored yet? My thoughts looking back, are that this would have been one dull game. The Chief has had a single Thorn to fight off, and the only major engagement was handled solely by marines. But I quite enjoyed writing this chapter. For this, this is the chapter where everything begins to change"

****Glossary****

Murphy's Law: Most people know this anyway, but Murphy's law basically runs: Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong. Pretty much a staple rule for fiction then, isn't it?

Disclaimer: The characters Mercurial Wisdom, Tempest, Solis and Nocturne are mine, as is Tina Maloski and the marine squad onboard her Pelican. I'm not going to push my luck and claim the un-named co-pilot though" The unidentified fourth party gate crashers are my creations, as is a certain new Forerunner machine, but everything else, 343 Industries owns. Even if there seem to be an awful lot of hijackers of their intellectual property lately"

****Phase 6: Wisdom is a Fickle Thing"**

Sometimes, the only way to get a good perspective on matters, is to go very far away, and look inward. To see the big picture, all of its component parts, and how they fit together. It sort of makes sense...

...But really, who on Earth thought that one up? Because, it is not helping, not this time. We have a view of the Milky Way, rotating inexorably below. Other galaxies are busy swirling away in

the near distance - relatively near, anyway - all moving away from us. Apart from Andromeda, but that won't hit for a long time yet, by which time we'll be long gone.

So, what else can we see, way out here? Well, not enough. So, let's zoom in, zoom in so that our view encompasses a single galactic arm and no more...

...Okay, so there's still a whole load of nothing to see; every blinding star, glowing nebulae, strobing pulsar and myriad other celestial body has joined forces to produce a single mass of wispy white smog. But suppose we could overlay it with patches of colour; the dominions of the factions we know so well.

Blue, a small clump of worlds with a tiny collection of scattered, outrider glows - the surviving Human core worlds, and the indescribably few outer colonies that, through means both fair and foul, somehow avoided the Covenant assault. Emerald green; a large territory home to the Sangheili and tentative allies. Meeting it with constantly shifting border, luminous purple - the Jiralhanae empire.

At first glance it seems the Sangheili are vastly outmatched by their vicious neighbours, until you take a closer look and notice the sheer number of worthless worlds within. Conquering for prestige has its good points, but like all things, it can be taken too far. The Yan'me are in there somewhere too, but their holdings are pitifully small when compared to those of their masters.

Despite the scale of the Jiralhanae sector, the greatest cause of concern would be the odd speck of sickly yellow scattered here and there. The Jiralhanae can only kill you - unless they happen to be feeling particularly cruel, in which case they'll settle for enslavement. The Flood on the other hand...

And one last colour. Bright, shining gold. Forerunner remnants, automated facilities still ticking over after all these years. There are a surprisingly large number within human space - more than even ONI can be aware of. But then, they failed to notice the massive Forerunner portal buried under the soil of their own homeworld... until the Prophet of Truth kindly went and dug it up for them. Sure, they spotted several structures on Reach, concealed them beneath SWORD and CASTLE bases, and correctly judged Onyx to be something other than natural, but even those who know not what to look for get lucky from time to time. Forerunner remnants are very good at keeping out of sight.

One single golden light gently pulses just outside of the galactic arm; our old friend, Archon. I'm sure we could find all sorts of intriguing things to distract us in the outside galaxy, but let's try not to get side tracked. You've got enough to keep track of as it is. So, let's zoom in to view our remote Forerunner world... Installation R-03 I believe that last Monitor called it. The one currently confronting the Master Chief in yet another Flood Containment Facility. Don't fret, we'll be down there soon enough, but first...

Low orbit. The empty Spirit of Fire orbits above us, a mere dark patch against the deeper blackness of the intergalactic void. More visible are three of the unknown "guests", the single unidentifiable

machine sporting limbs, and a pair of the harrier look-a-likes floating alongside the ship are showing pulsing running lights. It would appear that they aren't particularly bothered about being spotted... cocky, aren't they? I mean, three of them? Against an entire planet? Okay, so the other five are lurking elsewhere, successfully keeping out of sight, and they have at least four mechs down below... but still, those are some long odds, no two ways about it.

Okay, enough about them. A small meteorite flashing past catches our attention, fatally caught in Archon's gravitational field. Looking down after it, we can see clearly that, just like the vast majority of space debris that takes this very route, there is little chance of anyone being brained by it. Already, the rock is beginning to burn up.

...

That other one going past on the other hand...

Further, much further below, Archon's sector 16 lies soaking up the rays of the sun. In the southwest corner, near the great escarpment, a string of vehicles is emerging into the otherwise calm afternoon. It seems the humans have found a use for the Alchemist. The predictable one.

To the south, where rivers leap from the rim of the escarpment in a great show of spray, large birds are circling around their nesting sites - precarious ledges clinging to the sheer cliff face. They seem annoyed, screeching at shadows, swooping at... absolutely nothing. Until perspective quietly takes you aside and points out the little Constructor variants meticulously working away, placing metal cubes of unknown purpose into suspiciously regular looking nooks and crannies. The scattering of silver fragments across the ledges below suggest that this is a regular occurrence, and that the angry birds take offence at the intrusion on their nesting sites... good thing there are no catapults around!

...Okay, wrong place for that one!

Nipping back upstream, past Alpha base (where the most interesting thing going on is Patab doing mop duty), past the lone Sentinel heading the other way, and we reach the lake. There is no sign of the submarine leviathans right now, but there is something happening.

A funny looking machine is busy doing somersaults 50 metres above the water's surface, effortlessly tailing a pair of Sentinel Majors on an ever more elaborate course. Must be a flight test for a new model - a broad V-shaped wing with single glowing eye right at the nose, connects a pair of elongated levitation nacelles. From this, a solid cube with another, larger eye, is suspended by means of an improbably thin yet sturdy cylinder. A long dorsal fin stretching below that, completes the machine. Of weaponry, there is no sign. But whatever its intended purpose, the machine has no trouble sticking to the hind Sentinel Major's tail with the stubbornness of superglue.

A short distance away, on a tiny island close to the centre of the lake, a single Pelican lies almost alone. Five humans: the aircraft's co-pilot and a four man team of marines, are playing cards,

occasionally glancing in the direction of the Forerunner air show. A pitifully small pile of ration bars lie on the rock between them. Meanwhile, in the cockpit, Tina Maloski is alternating her attention between the radar, and a book. Goodness knows where she's been hiding that one; it seems a rather odd choice for something to grab when you're abandoning ship with all haste.

...And something tells me I'd better get back to the important stuff before events get away from us. So, turning our eyes towards the south, we espy a now familiar towering dome.

Within, a pair of SPARTAN II super soldiers, a Forerunner artificial overseer and its not very subtle servants, and a certain alien menace that absolutely refuses to go extinct. Out here though, there is virtually nothing to indicate any of that.

Virtually. There is a slight clue to the concealed threats, in the form of a pair of six wheeled vehicles in close proximity to each of the dome's two entrances, facing them with slowly rotating weapons mounts. So, something's expecting trouble.

Nipping in through that most venerable of unauthorised access points, we weave down a seemingly infinite network of ventilation passageways. Hither and thither the vents run, dotted with whirling blades and host to the odd Sentinel taking an unorthodox shortcut. Smart, the drones are not, but even they have the capacity for the odd electronic brainstorm. Just don't count on it happening when you're watching.

Now, where do those corner cutting machines get into the ducts? Well, perhaps through the odd missing sections of wall, where the vents link up to the more conventional transit conduits. The architectural planners of this facility really were thinking with efficient Flood containment in mind; they were even savvy enough to realise what would happen if Infection forms got into the vents! So, any Flood cunning enough to get in here is going to find a nasty surprise waiting!

Slipping through one of the aforementioned gaps into the wider transit passageways, where the air is laced with a hint of static, we continue inwards with all haste. All at once the conduit ends with a shimmering, semi-permeable forcefield dividing air and vacuum, keeping the latter in place and where it belongs. The airless void between outer and inner domes is, not surprisingly for anyone with a rudimentary understanding of thermodynamics, rather cold. Another inhibiting factor for the Flood to overcome. The facility designers did their job well, this time. As long as all involved parties (excluding the Flood themselves) play their cards right, the situation could still be successfully contained. But what are the chances of that? Just wait, Murphy's law will soon be rearing its ugly head. Again.

Moving exceptionally fast for such normally graceful machines, a small herd of Sentinel Majors burst through the forcefield behind and make all haste for the very apex of the inner dome. Following, we find a small shaft leading downwards, covered by another set of forcefields. Even here (or especially here), nothing has been left to chance; these forcefields are not set to allow physical objects passage. The only way to descend in - or ascend out - is to allow the forcefields to deactivate and reactivate in sequence. But

we don't have to worry about that - being _non_-corporeal entities has definite advantages.

So, leaving the now conveniently loitering Sentinels behind, we descend through the crackling blue glows. Ten or so of the things later (again, why settle for a mere "kill"), we emerge into the vault, and espy the confrontation below.

One purple eyed Monitor. Twenty, or thereabouts, Sentinel and Sentinel Majors. One annoyed human, and three hundred still secure (for now) containment cells. And, just one voice.

"_Greetings. I am 59point29 Mercurial Wisdom. I am the Monitor of Installation R-03_."

>So, after all that meandering about, it appears we've arrived right on time. What a coincidence!<p>

###

Archon â€" Sector 16, Flood Containment Facility (Archon occupation day 3 â€" Mid afternoon)

The silence, was almost palpable. The Chief, senses razor sharp, watched the Monitor with utmost caution. His touchy AI companion was doing the same â€" with about 10% of her processing capabilities. And the other 90%? Busy taking guesses â€" sorry, _predictions_ â€" of every possible way this situation could unfold, and every possible way to maximise her survival chancesâ€| _And_ the Master Chief's.

But all that planning went for naught, when the Monitor took the very course of action that she had categorised as "not in a million years." It _drifted off_! More precisely, it drifted back slightly, then took a vaguely erratic, jerky flight path to a point thirty metres from the Chief, and started investigating the creature in the nearest cell. With somewhat more visible purpose, the ring of Sentinels also dispersed across the vault to check other cells, leaving the Chief and Serina lost for words. Well, maybe not quite. The Chief didn't really say much anyway, and Serinaâ€| Serina _always_ had something to say. It just took a little longer than usual to drag the reluctant sentence from whichever dark, rarely visited corner of her mind it had decided to hole up in.

"Wait, did he justâ€| dismiss us?"

It seemed the Monitor had. It moved onto the next containment chamber, completely ignoring the intruder. It was however, muttering to itself.

"_Specimen 504 â€" Specimen shows no change to previous survey records. Parasite remains dormant but appears to maintain minor awareness of host sensory data_."

"Primiâ€| no, I'll stop doing that and give you a chanceâ€| Master Chief, see if you can get his attention."

"Any suggestions?"

"Maybe. Getting in front and waving your arms might work."

As the Monitor was currently moving back in the SPARTANs direction, the Chief opted not to walk in the machine's direction. He didn't want to appear threatening, so he settled for edging slightly closer to the vault wall, staying well away from the squirming monstrosity two cells along. Gradually, the Monitor jerked closer.

"_Specimen 506 â€" Specimen is completely dormant. Containment security team to recheck status in three solar cycles â€" purge and replace if no change registered._

"_Specimen 507 â€" Specimen is curiously agitated, containment science team to review recordings for probable causes. Minor degradation of host motor neurones detected; containment science team to also research this phenomenon and theorise potential methods of replication._

The Monitor's voice was definitely at odds with its movement â€" it spoke clearly, every word being exactly what it should be, but the thing didn't exactly float around the in the same fashion. With that much jerking, you could easily see that, should the AI ever be given limbs, one would constantly be at odds with the other. It was almost like it was at war with itselfâ€|

"_Specimen 508 â€" Specimen is absent. Containment team has confirmed disposal of deceased specimen. Replacement scheduled to arrive in five solar cycles_."

Sliding sideways with eye staring at the wall, the Monitor abruptly came to a halt. There was something unyielding blocking its path. It retraced its movements momentarily, then swivelled and took in the view; a view comprising mostly of green iridescent armour. After a second's observation, it made to swerve around the obstructionâ€| which promptly moved to block its path.

A few attempts at this, and the Monitor gave up. The Chief's motion tracker started registering a number of small blue blips, as some of the Sentinels turned and began to cruise slowly in the SPARTAN's direction. Their master tilted ever so slightly forward, giving off a faintly puzzled aura. And, something else. It almost felt like the machine wasâ€| expectant. But it still remained silent.

"Real chatterbox, isn't he?"

The Chief didn't answer. He guessed that the best way to prevent Serina from going back to her previous "moan moan moan", was simply not to irritate her. And the best way to do that, was to keep his mouth shut. He was sure he could _act_ smart enough to placate her, but _talking_ smart enough might be a bit beyond him. Now, John wasn't the dumbest of humans, not by a long shot, but something told him that unless he started speaking like a professor, he'd still fall short of her lofty intellectual expectations. So, he quietly watched the Monitor, the returning Sentinels, and the matching blue blips on the tracker. One question though, _why blue_?

"Unknown. The tracker is a good bit of technology, but the standard identification setup is a bit limited. Typical military, if you're not a friend, you must be a foe. So I wired in blue for those we're a little unsure about. It requires AI supervision though, so expect it to revert back to two colours only if you're unaccompanied in here. Now, on other matters, I think you'll have to make the first move

with our friend there."

The Monitor still hadn't moved, or spoken. Almost all of the Sentinels had by now arrived back, floating in a rough semi-circle around and behind their master.

"So, Mercurialâ€| Wisdomâ€|" the Chief began. And then stalled, struggling to think of a conversation starter. Eventually he settled for something simple. "What is the purpose of this Installation?"

Still no verbal response, although he fancied he saw the purple eye get slightly brighter, and almost imperceptibly narrow.

"Installation 0 is the Ark, and 1 through 7 are Halo rings. So an R-series Installation is..?"

Had he imagined the machine's voice earlier? But no, where would the name had come from?

"Hello?" he said, reaching out and gently tapping its shell. It did not flinch. "Anyone in there?"

Finally, the Monitor chose to speak.

"_Protocol dictates that I am not allowed to interact with Outsiders â€" article P42. Exceptions â€" I am allowed to identify myself, and to issue this statement. Only Forerunners, Reclaimers and entities listed in article A02 have the authority to verbally countermand this rule. Otherwise, unless acting in self defence against a confirmed hostile intruder, I must neither aid nor hinder their actions. Statement ends_."

â€|

Well, that explains the lack of communication. If Guilty Spark was any indication, these things wouldn't deviate from their assigned protocol if the universe was falling apart around their audio receptors. So I'm not going to get anything else fromâ€| wait a moment. __**Reclaimers**__?

"Could you repeat thatâ€| third line?" he asked, carefully. The Monitor obliged.

"_Certainly. Only Forerunners, __**Reclaimers**__ and entities listed in article A02 have the authority to __**verbally**__ countermand this rule_."

â€|

Is it just me, or did I detect a slight emphasis on certain words this time around?_ â€| Come to think of it, was there a hint of aggression underlying its predominantly sterile voice? â€| He shook his head. No, must be my imagination_.

Serina suddenly caught on to his plan. She didn't (what a surprise!) agree with him.

"Chief, I don't think this is a good idea."

He ignored her. The UNSC needed information, and the Monitors were the only likely source on this entire planet. Besides, the last two had been perfectly benign, if a little odd.

"Mercurial Wisdom"

"Listen Chief, You. Are. Making. A. Mistake!"

"Deactivate protocol article P42."

"Oh, _now you've done it_!"

The Monitor almost seemed to shudder. The eye flickered " there was a hint of red in there, maybe a streak of blue" but then the purple returned full force and swallowed the colours of sanity and full blown rampancy alike. The Chief suddenly felt rather uneasy.

"_Accessing Alchemist bio scanner records. Reclaimer status confirmed._" And then the Monitor's voice noticeably changed, as the hitherto submerged aggressive quality surged to the front. "_Protocol P42 successfully disabled. Sentinels, lock weapons on intruder_."

Serina had been _bang_ in the right, that _had_ been a mistake.

"_I told you_!" she screamed at him, as the Sentinels moved closer and charged their weapons. "_Interaction_ doesn't _just_ mean _talking_!"

The Chief hefted his own beam weapon, started mentally analysing the horseshoe of Sentinels surrounding, gauging which one would create the biggest escape gap if destroyed. Simultaneously, a small but significant part of his mind took up its own project " calculating the number of hits his shields could afford to take, and which machines were likely to fire and when. Giving an exasperated noise, Serina joined in the preparations, a tiny window in his HUD showing her surreptitiously transferring shield power from places it wasn't likely to be needed (such as fingers and soles) to where it was (like the torso" or the _head_). As the various analysis threads pinged to their conclusions, he tensed and-

"_Oh, how very __**clever**_." Mercurial Wisdom's voice drifted across the tableau, inexplicably causing the Chief's joints to freeze. Locked in place, he could only watch as the purple eyed intelligence floated closer. All jerking suggestion of absent mindedness was gone now, this Monitor knew _exactly_ what it was doing, and had done for some time. The Chief had been _played_, and without ever quite realising. And now he knew the significance of that colour " purple was midway between blue and red" this was a dangerous foe, and underestimating it again could be fatal. Assuming the Chief somehow survived _this_ encounter"

The Monitor was now right up against the immobilised SPARTAN's faceplate, staring into his visor and forcing the Chief to reluctantly avert his eyes.

"_It really was a __**most clever**__ plan._" it remarked, the pulsing light supplying yet more torture to the Chief's eyes. Serina

increased the filter setting; it didn't seem to help much.

"_Consider â€" one race has managed to do what no other could â€" drive off the Flood through a means other than mere military might. While the only other proposed strategy was to scour large portions of the galaxy and removing life from the equation. An effective argument, but one argued nonetheless to be "extreme"._"

The Monitor, much to the Chief's relief, floated off and gazed into a nearby cell. He experimentally tried to twitch a finger, hoping the armoured gauntlet would do the same. It steadfastly refused to cooperate. A window flickered into view in his HUD â€" Serina had initiated a diagnostics program.

"_What has been lost, can be regained. A line of thought infuriatingly recurrent in council discussions. Despite their efforts, all attempts to recover the lost knowledge of Erde-Tyrene ended in failure. And so, knowing their time was coming to an end, my creators made a decision._"

The diagnostic program ticked round to 100%, and reported no problems. The Chief didn't buy it â€" the Monitor had sneaked something on board, there was just no other explanation for the MJOLNIR's insistence on staying _exactly_ as it was. There was a sudden sensation of something warm pouring out of his skull â€" Serina had left to investigate the issue personallyâ€| and then Mercurial Wisdom was back in front, recapturing the SPARTAN's attention.

"_Alongside the first Halo array, a secondary purpose Installation chain was constructed. We Monitors of the R-series Installations were intended as the final line of defence in a universe without its ancestral protectors and rightful rulers. We were intended to __**think**__ our way to defeating the Flood, not simply use brute force as our crude brothers on the ring Installations are wont to do. To them went the weapons, and to us, the brains. A poor decision, and one of many â€" none of **our** brethren would even __**consider**__ firing all of the rings at once. Single Installations yes, but why wipe out __**all**__ life in an infection is localised? But all of us were bound by excessive layers of protocol._"

The Monitor turned its back on him, and drifted back into the heart of the Sentinel flock, giving the Chief some much welcomed breathing space.

"_I have been watching your race with great interest_. " it continued, voice suddenly a lot quieter. Quieter, and more dangerous too.

"_It was you, the natives of Erde-Tyrene, who successfully stopped the Flood. Your empire, along with the assistance of the San-Shyuum, that forced the Flood to retreat. Logically, you would reveal the exact method to other civilisations, but that somehow slipped your mind. All we knew, was that it involved gene manipulation. My research has indicated that it could well have been applied to the rest of us, but still you failed to share the specifics. What __**didn't**__ slip your mind, was your aggressive tendencies._"

The Chief was starting to get worried. He was now fully aware, Reclaimer or not, his fate was entirely down to the whims of an AI

that apparently _hated_ his whole species. Not a good position to be in. He could have argued, but his mouth had already caused _one_ disaster today. Accidentally giving further offence to the ranting Monitor was not a course recommended by natural selection.

"_Fifty systems. What drove your species to it? To annihilate the defenceless populations of these worlds. Some have since decided that it was a lack of room for your population after the Flood consumed so many worlds. But I don't believe that. It may have played a role, but I believe the rest of the problem lay in your natural aggressiveness. Indeed, there were signs that you were considering repeating your actions. And so, I believe my masters were right to strip you of your empire, to return you to a pre-technological state on Erde-Tyrene. It was an extreme course of action, but extreme issues demand extreme solutions._

"_A small but growing number of councillors began to have their doubts. When the Flood returned, they realised the negative aspects of their chosen course of action. But as your countermeasures had been irretrievably lost, my masters were left with no choice. You forced them. __**You forced them to fire the array, to destroy themselves**__. If it wasn't for the Shield worlds and theâ€|misplaced arguments of certain influential councillors, your species would have died with them._" The voice took on a mocking lilt as it continued:_ "A shameful waste of potential, they said. __**A shameful waste of opportunity I say**__!" _â€|And that was the end of the mocking.

The Chief had had enough. Mistake or not, some things _needed_ to be said.

"But by your own admission, this was millennia ago. Things changeâ€|_species_ change."

The Monitor spun slowly on its axis, a full 360 surveying the entire vault. And then it rotated again, this time flipping on a horizontal axis to view the top of the vault, and the bottom. And sped up as it did so, snapping back to pierce the Chief with eye of purple fire.

"_A valid hypothesis, but not one to bear fruit. When your species, like so many others secured on the shield world and Ark Installations, were reseeded onto your respective homeworlds, you were being given a second chance. For you, the proverbial clean slate. No traces of your past existence remained. There were __**no**__ records, __**no**__ memories and __**no**__ artefacts to corrupt your thoughts._

"_For all of us, custodians of the legacy of our masters, protocol prevented us from taking an active role in your affairs. So the councillors had decreed, so was our course set. We were to continue our respective tasks separately â€" so any Gravemind resurgence would be unable to learn of all developments capable of threatening it. The array Monitors were given no knowledge of the R-series Installations for this reason, and our own protocol prevented us from affecting or communicating with the array in any way._

"_But there was __**nothing**__ to prevent us from __**watching**__. As the other R-series Installations began to diverge and cut each other off, I chose to begin watching __**you**__. I watched as your

species rose, from primitives with clubs to primitives with swords, to primitives with guns and starships. I watched as you once again left your ancestral home and colonised other worlds. I watched as you made technological discovery after discovery. And I watched, as your new empire began to fracture._"

Suspicion began to rise within the Chief. He didn't think the Monitor's monologue was going to favour him; it had already made its stance _quite_ clear. Serina returned to her chip, flashing a single line of text onto the HUD:

-I CAN'T DO ANYTHING AT PRESENT " DON'T DO ANYTHING TO SCREW THE SITUATION UP ANY FURTHER."

"As if he would do that!

"_It is proof of your innate aggression, that even with no threat to your existence, you assembled an unfeasibly large military presence. There was no need to develop your fleet to that scale, no __**need**__!_"

"There was a need." The Chief spoke quietly. "It was for security."

The Monitor glared " if it wasn't doing so already.

"_Security? Security against __**what**__? I will re-iterate, there was __**no legitimate threat**__. Your "Colonial Military Administration" was sufficient, but no, you had to build a bigger and bigger force loyal only to __**Earth**__'s government. Such actions resulted in increased tensions with the colonies; you were becoming too obsessed with control. Is it any wonder your insurrectionist faction formed under such pressures? Your UNSC, your "security", was a direct cause of the threat you claim it was to guard against! The Forerunners had the view that no species should be allowed to build an interstellar empire if they were incapable of maintaining its stability, and __**you are living proof**__!__**""**__

"But-"

"_**NO, NO "BUT'S"!*_ The eye was now doing a good job of imitating a small sun. Albeit an oddly coloured one. "_I know of you and your kind " the legendary SPARTAN II's and III's. Humans created only for battle. In their self destructive quest for power, __**your**__ masters took innocents and turned them " __**you**__ " into pure killing machines. You may argue that you were the sole reason for your species survival when the Covenant arrived, but the fact remains that this was decided __**before**__ any hint of their presence reached you! It was pure coincidence that you and they clashed in the first place! And the other question is: __**why**__ did you clash in the first place?_"

The question floated across the tableau with distinctly accusing overtures wafting in its wake. Serina promptly jumped the gun and gave the response still forming on the Chief's lips.

"Simple. They attacked us."

"_You are referring to the incident of your "Harvest"? "Yes, they did. I believe the local Covenant commanders were the Jiralhanae

known as Maccabeus and Tartarus, so perhaps you may be excused for that particular incident. __**However**__, I do not believe the Covenant to be trulyâ€| wrong._"

Mercurial Wisdom paused, and looked off to the Chief's left.

"_Curiousâ€|_"

Unable to turn his head, the Chief was forced to trust his ears. He didn't like their reports. Slight noises; slithering, tapping. An inhuman groan â€" barely audible, but strangely hard to ignore. Two Sentinels lurking at the back of the group took their cue and relocated themselves out of immediate sight.

"â€|_Yes, curious. The Flood Juggernaut form may be the most powerful of the none "pure" variants, but I was sure the hibernation vault would keep it docileâ€|_"

"Master Chief?" Serina whispered in his ear. "Permission to do whatever it takes to get us out of this mess of yours?"

"Granted." He whispered back. Hopefully the Monitor would be too distracted to notice the little exchange. He watched another Sentinel follow the first two, and then a fourth. Finally satisfied that the stirring Flood was under enough guard, Wisdom turned back.

"_Right, where were we? â€|Yes, you and the Covenant. Did you ever notice that your opponents were an Alliance, while you stood alone? Seven different races working together; how could you __**not**__ have been a part of that? And the Covenant were led by the San-Shyuum â€" formerly your closest allies. The issue __**must**__ have been on your side. You may say that you had no choice, but tell me: did you ever __**try**__ to negotiate after that first encounter? No. You chose to let your __**guns**__ do the talking. That, or you hurled insults. Hardly the modus operandi of a civilised race desiring peace._"

Now this was concerning; the Monitor almost seemed to be making sense. The Chief wasn't going to be swayed by the machine's logic, but if you took its words and looked at them from the right angle, you could sort of see what it was driving at.

"Don't even consider it." muttered Serina. "This thing may be using logic, but it isn't coming to anywhere near the right conclusions. Almost makes you wonder what type of logic it _is_ using."

"â€|_and now we come to your interference in the affairs of my masters. The Covenant may cannibalise our technology for their own, but at least they show it the proper respect. You instead choose to disregard our Installations and their true purposes. You have __**personally**__ destroyed Installation 04, thus sparing the Flood in the facility on the neighbouring gas giant. You destroyed the Ark â€" taking down a Gravemind to be sure, but destroying a repository of genetic material capable of rejuvenating the __**entire galaxy**__. And you only __**slowed**__ the Flood, for Graveminds reform in new locations whenever sufficient Flood biomass accumulates. Your friends from the orbiting ship destroyed a Shield World, causing immeasurable damage to our local anti-Flood capabilities. You may have had your reasons, but these repeated

incidents __**do not**__._

"_I have tried to overlook these, but no more! Even your behaviour following your arrival on ****my**** Installation only serves to prove that my former decision was justified. You have attacked my minions without provocation, caused another outsider to single handedly scrap an entire defence force, and your use of the Alchemist! I give you one last chance to redeem yourselves; I grant you access to one of my more sophisticated facilities, and what do you do? Use it to turn out ****more**** weapons. Not acceptable! You were lacking other necessary supplies the Alchemist could have supplied you with â€" fuel, accommodation, water purifiers! So ****why weapons****?"_

The question lingered, waiting for an answer, but neither of the captive audience took the bait. A muffled thud sounded; another pair of Sentinels floated off. More noises made themselves known from around the vault â€" slowly but surely, the Flood were waking up.

"Whatâ€| your decision?" asked Serina, already knowing the answer. Wisdom sighed, sounding almost weary.

"_Humans and their Constructs, how simple minded. Always needing things spelled out. Very well, as you're not going anywhere, I may as well oblige._

"_I decided that you humans needed to prove yourselves before you should properly be granted Reclaimer status. It would be difficult, for your actions are undoubtedly caused by your chromosomes â€" your genetics. But even so, transgressions may be overlooked if sufficient contributions to a mutually beneficial cause are made. If you could, say, rediscover your lost method of defeating the Flood and made it general knowledge, that would be a start. Overcoming your nature would be harder, but another step in the right direction. Naturally, you need guiding._

"_Twenty five of your Earth years ago, I watched one of your ships demolish a Shield World. To that ship, one of my probes transmitted a signal, one with the sole purpose of luring them ****here****. Your arrival, and that of the ****other**** outsiders, was not intended, but the plan is sound._

"_You and your companions on Archon will work to re-master your lost art. You will __**not**__ leave sector 16 or approach restricted zones. Use of weapons is __**forbidden**__. In return, I will provide you with a daily delivery of nutrient slurry. Any ideas you advance will be tested by me. While you continue to work towards this cause, I will take no further action against the rest of your species. Be warned that_ I**** can****_ â€" you have already disabled all protocols preventing that._"

"I can't help but think of an old proverb." commented Serina, over an ever louder backdrop of Flood cries. Why the Monitor wasn't doing anything more than splitting off ever greater portions of its escort was anyone's guess. _It must be absolutely __**obsessed**__ with us_. "It runs something like: The Sins of the father are the sins of the sons."

Wisdom blinked, that is, the eye went momentarily dark.

"_Yes, a most curious saying. But highly illogical. Rest assured, I overlooked all incidents preceding the Array activation when making my decision. Your actions since are more than enough to-_ " CRASH! The Monitor didn't even miss a beat. "_Sentinels, execute containment protocol Alpha!_"

A familiar scream pierced the air, as a _very_ vengeful monstrosity lumbered into the light, just visible to the Chief's left. At once it was struck by a pair of Sentinel beams, which served to irritate it if nothing else. It's misshapen foot crashed down, crushing the remains of a Sentinel Major previously hit by the careening cell cover. One of the long, whip like tentacles casually swiped out, and flung another Sentinel pair straight at the wall.

"Chief! You can move again!"

Serina's cry came just in time, for the monstrosity now had _him_ in its sights. Free to take evasive action he backpedalled, allowing a trio of Sentinels to slide in front and open up.

"Thanks Serina." he gasped, getting more distance between himself and the alien menace.

"Don't mention it." she responded. And after a moment's hesitation, continued: "Although, your being able to move again wasn't my doing. Wisdom is a little distracted right now, so the intruding program shut itself off. I'm smart, but I don't claim credit not owed to me."

The Flood spawn screamed. For a moment it looked like the tables had turned as more and more beams sliced in from every angle. But then... another cell cover on a higher floor flew outwards, bouncing from the platform edge and narrowly missing Mercurial Wisdom. More covers followed.

#####_Unguarded Exit, __**NOT**__ Stage Right!#####_

"_All Containment Facility security teams to full alert! Outbreak attempt in progress!_" Almost before the Monitor began speaking, another flock of Sentinels descended into the vault, emerging from a shaft in the ceiling and spreading out to target as many of the loosed Flood as possible.

The first (Juggernaut was it?) took one last swipe at a Major lingering just at the outside limits of its frighteningly long reach, before finally succumbing to the weight of twenty odd hissing beams and falling like a tree. The Chief could swear he felt the floor shake under the impact "no, wait, that was the _other_ Juggernaut stomping up behind him_! Almost before conscious thought had its say, his own hijacked Sentinel beam was being wrestled into firing position, as the SPARTAN turned and retreated. Shockingly powerful these things may have been, but they were lacking a little in the speed department, which was a _good_ thing. Beam weapon in position, he steeled himself to fire-

"_**No Weapons**__, Human!_" The Monitor made itself heard over the cacophony of battle.

"Sod you." muttered the Chief in an uncharacteristic moment of annoyance, and pulled the trigger anyway. The creature screeched as

the burning blue beam sliced into it, bringing back both tentacles and twirling them in front of its... well, it didn't exactly have a face, so sensory cluster would have to suffice. The protective measure, while looking impressive, did nothing on a defensive front when a Sentinel beam was involved... unless you counted paying dividends of nicely seared flesh. A few seconds of that, and one of the tentacles gave up and snapped off. That was the good news. The bad news was that the battery had just run dry, so no more torture through that method.

Dropping the now worthless piece of junk, the Chief reached behind for one of his reserve weapons. The pro's and con's of each flashed through his mind, each presenting good arguments â€" but the necessity for a quick kill meant the SPARTAN laser won out. But even as he grasped for the oversized survival tool, the remaining tentacle careened into him.

"Ouch, I felt that! Master Chief, your vital readings suggest not letting that happen again!"

Struggling for balance before the monster appendage came round again, the SPARTAN laser's secondary targeting beam zigzagged across the creature. Seeing it ready to issue another thrashing, the Chief took a gamble and fired prematurely. The resulting beam was greatly underpowered, but the damage already inflicted to the horror had sufficiently softened it up. Besides, the laser was an anti-armour weapon; even at one third charge it still had sufficient punch to deal with infantry â€" even when the "infantry" in question was an 18 footer piece of walking nightmare fuel. Result: another toppling Juggernaut trying to use gravity to take the Chief with it. Unsurprisingly, it failed in this last wish, as the Chief nimbly hopped backwards.

"Thanks for the tip." he remarked, responding to Serina's previous "advice", as he watched the ongoing tussle between the Sentinels and the other Juggernauts.

"No problem. I try to take an interest when bits of my host start going offline."

...By host, did she mean the Chief... or his armour?

Sudden motion a little too close for comfort, drew his attention back to the scorched hulk at his feet. Bits of the downed creature were pulsing, pushing outwards with ominous implications. Before the Chief could react, they burst simultaneously; and five squirming Infection forms were rushing him. With no time to think, instinct took over, the net result being the sudden demise of two personal space invaders at the tips of a pair of fists. The other three got through, jumped... and sizzled as they met suddenly electrified outer armour plating. One thing about Serina, she thought fast.

Five? In one body? These things are Combat and Carrier forms combined! Another Juggernaut was stumbling backwards on the next floor; victim of a precisely placed mortar delivered courtesy of an Enforcer drifting up from somewhere below. Four more Infections burst out, making a jump and a beeline for the only organic lifeform in the vicinity; the Chief welcomed them with the customary burst of MA5 rifle fire.

"_Final warning, human!_"

Fine. I'd rather leave anyway. The Chief eyed the nearest airlock, waited for his moment, and made a dash for it. A blue Sentinel beam swiped past, causing him to duck and subsequently stumble. As he regained his balance yet again and neared the airlock, the door hissed open. It was _not_ empty.

"SILT!" came a sudden "expletive" from Serina, matching the Chief's opinion on seeing the pair of quadruped mechs clomping forward with no intention of stopping. Most marines would have dropped their own bit of foul language here; the Chief's conditioning silently rolled him sideways instead, straight into the waiting reach of _another Juggernaut_... which staggered under the weight of bullets suddenly pouring into it. The Chief made another hasty retreat and left the Flood and mechs to duke it out between them.

"_Alert, additional hostiles have entered the containment vault. All units update targeting protocols_."

"Were they firing at us, or the Flood?" asked Serina, barely noticed amongst the confusion. An Enforcer was in the process of crashing to the floor, a Juggernaut on top and along for the ride. Its companion took offence and launched off a volley of pulse beam rounds. And _then_, all three of them fell victim to a single missile launched from the nearest mech... not one of the two that had startled the Chief, for the other three airlocks had released six more of the things.

"I'm giving up running survival probability tests; it's depressing. Could you _please_ take cover?"

Tearing his eyes from the ever intensifying melee, the Chief spotted a convenient looking alcove. Only one _small_ problem; it was twenty metres away, past a trio of slightly charred Sentinels blazing away at a Juggernaut on the other side of the vault. There was the usual inhuman screech from the monster, before it waddled up to the mostly intact corpse of a nearby smouldering Enforcer and _flicked it clean across the vault_. For the Chief, everything slowed to a crawl. The cartwheeling mass narrowly missed the circling Wisdom by a hands-breadth (eliciting a noticeable "_I say!"), impacted the Sentinels and rammed them straight into the wall. Flood three, Forerunners _nil_. Unfortunately for the Juggernaut it didn't get a chance to enjoy its victory, because the nearest mech fired off a plasma round and gutted the thing. And then turned back to Sentinel disposal.

The Chief made his move, darting quickly to cross the temporarily clear space in a semi-hunched fashion. The alcove turned out to be _just_ big enough to conceal your average human and your average SPARTAN decked out in full battle armour was a _little_ bigger than your average human, so the Chief had to get creative. The remains of a containment cell cover lay within reach; he quickly grabbed it and propped it up to form a third wall to the triangular space. Considering the brute strength of the Flood it wasn't much security, but it protected against stray pulse or Sentinel beams efficiently enough, with the added bonus that Infection forms could only skitter optimistically inwards from one direction. The semi transparency of the thick green material also meant he could still keep tabs on the continually evolving battle outside.

He'd much rather be out there taking part â€" the Monitor had been right about SPARTANs being created primarily for battle if nothing else; even now his blood was singing at him to up sticks and take part. But SPARTANs hadn't been trained purely for battle â€" beneath that imposing armour and reflective visor was a brain, and an intelligent one at that. And that brain was telling him one thing â€" Wait for your moment, going out now would be futile. So he watched, and bided his time.

The Monitor had apparently changed tack â€" horrendous losses despite more Sentinels arriving by the minute served to produce some interesting tactics. Now the Sentinel Majors were doing most of the work, firing much stronger blue beams than normal. The Chief wondered about that, but quickly realised that they were simply routing the vast majority of their power to one function at a time. If a Juggernaut swung at them, the attack inevitably hit overshield strength defencesâ€¦ if it hit at all â€" sometimes the machine would redirect power to its thrusters instead, leaving the enraged goliath attempting to thrash thin air. And when the machines fired, overcharged beams tore into the Juggernauts with ease.

â€¦Everything else under Wisdom's control however, was still suffering from appallingly low "life" expectancies. There were only two battered Enforcers still twirling around, flying back to back to maximise shield coverage. The surviving Sentinel grunts had taken to lurking in such corners and crannies they could find, darting out only occasionally to add their converging beams to single targets. For the most part this strategy was paying offâ€¦ unless they tried it on one of the mechs. Then, they just got slaughtered by the return bullet shower.

But this time, the mecha weren't having it all their own way. Weight of numbers and confined combat spaces were combining to slowly wear them down. Two of their number had taken to dragging one leg each rather than walking normally â€" a low aimed tentacle knocking something out of place. Overcharge beams were managing to leave visible scars â€" not deep ones it had to be said, but still a step up from last time. The missile launcher on the back of one sparked furiously; that particular machine lumbering into formation behind two of its colleagues and contenting itself with dealing with the Sentinels trying (unsuccessfully) to sneak an attack from the rear.

The last pair of Enforcers launched a barrage of mortars, clearing a fairly safe looking path to the nearest airlock. The Chief weighed up his chances, and decided to risk it. Bursting from his makeshift shelter, assault rifle at the ready, he charged for freedom. Two Infection forms took a sudden interest, and his assault rifle took an interest back. Another couple of metres past them took him unfortunately close to a plodding mech, busy trading blows with a Juggernaut it had managed to push up against a wall. Assuming it was safely distracted, the Chief ducked as he drew level on its other side, just on the off chance it-

WHUMMPH!

And a fast moving plasma burst discharged straight over his head! Luckily the MJOLNIR shields were at full strength, but even so the proximity of the blast drained his shields nearly to zero, giving the

built in alarm a chance to go off. But he'd got past, taking a near headshot in the process and raising temperatures inside his armour uncomfortably high, but he'd made it.

"_I say!_" screeched Wisdom, voice following right on the heels of an excessively loud impact noise. Aware that his immediate path was clear the Chief glanced back, noting the gash marring the side of the previously pristine Monitor. Once again, he was left somewhat uncertain as to just _whom_ the mech had been firing at. One thing was pretty clear though â€" that had been no ordinary plasma bolt.

"_Right, __**that DOES IT**_!" And with that furious outcry, the familiar sound of a Monitor charging up its own hideously powerful beam filled the air. Now it was _really_ time to get out of here!

The airlock was just ahead, door still shut but beckoning nonetheless. Just a short distance from safety, andâ€| a Juggernaut leapt out of nowhere to plant itself in his wayâ€|

"What? How?"

This time the Chief _did_ curse, as he rolled behind the nearest downed Enforcer. Events were starting to look distinctly skewed against him. Keeping his head down was looking increasingly difficult, and he was aware of that Juggernaut on approach â€" despite the quartet of Sentinels on offence against it. But thenâ€|

"Oly Oly Oxen Free!"

A much welcomed sound whistled across his earpiece, simultaneous to the airlock door sliding open and four rockets flaring out. The Juggernaut _literally_ came apart at the seams. Leaving the Sentinels to clean up the bulbous Infection forms popping out, the Chief vaulted the wreckage and charged for the already closing airlock. Slipping through with moments to spare, he almost fell into the waiting SPARTAN, Douglas busy reloading the four barrelled rocket launcher. For a moment, no one spoke. Until Serina gave her usual sort of comment.

"Well, you certainly took your time!"

###

They made their hurried way back to the alternative entrance Douglas had found, seeking to leave the battle as far behind as realistically possible. He wasn't talking, and neither was the Chief, but Serina apparently was incapable of shutting up at the moment.

"You realise how lucky _we_ were," she was telling the Chief as they pushed their way back into the maintenance passageways. There was a distinct lack of anything Forerunner floating around out here. "You took an appalling risk towards the end there! Do you know what that thing fired at you?"

â€|

"Fine, I'll tell you. It was some sort of fusion between plasma and

miniature rail-gun systems. If you hadn't ducked, it would have taken your head clear off! And then where would I have been?"

â€|

"Keeping silent won't help you this time! Your mouth was responsible for quite a bit of that mess, so I need to train it. _So TALK_!"

â€|

"Fine, I'll give up for now. But any day now, your brain and I are going to have a discussion!

"Douglas, how's our evac. route?"

Douglas took the opportunity toâ€| say absolutely nothing. For a moment anyway, but then Serina's rising ire convinced him that maybe talking wasn't such a bad idea.

"Arctic Claw is on standby, they'll pick us up the moment we get out. We're about a minute away from that point now, no hostiles that I saw on this route."

"Good. At least one of you thought things through before diving in. I'll assume you were late for that reason?"

"Actually ma'am, I waited for twenty seconds for the right moment to intervene. There was no point getting involved sooner â€" my Point Defence Gauntlet wouldn't have been able to handle the amount of firepower in there."

Serina presumably looked at that one from all angles; there was no other reason not to respond for the length of time it took her. Not to mention she changed topics again, so there couldn't have been any fault she could have nit-picked at either.

"Right. So, Primitive, let me tell you _why_ you shouldn't do that again. Douglas, you might want to know as well."

A small window appeared in the Chief's HUD, showing a plasma burst as it left the anomalous tube on the side of the mech. This wasn't the one that had nearly felled him, but an earlier one used to down a Juggernaut. The playback advanced frame by frame, before pausing just before impact.

"So, clearly a plasma round. But if you look closely (the image magnified, showing a number of grey specks amidst the burning projectile) you can see there's more to it. Namely that it has a _solid core_. The weapon probably has limited range before the core succumbs to thermal energy and evaporates, at which point the plasma should disperse, but during that period it can use the combined super heavy mass and intense heat to penetrate pretty much anything. Thank goodness it's on such a small scale, but from now on Primitive, _don't_ go near those machines!"

The Chief took a note of this information, mentally categorised the weapon by the fairly simple moniker of plasma rail-gun, and filed it away for later review.

"And before I forget, do we reckon we just had an audience with "Tempest"? Because otherwise, we've got something even worse coming. Something else to look forward-"

About then, the exit came into view. And so did the two sleek six wheeled vehicles guarding it. Both parties momentarily failed to react, but as the two SPARTANs cleared the threshold and dashed sideways, there came a rising whir. Each vehicle opened fire, high velocity bullets draining a good percentage of the Chief's shield and pinging off Douglas's suddenly activated blue Point Defence shield. But the machines kept on firing down the hallway, and once the SPARTANs escaped the initial barrage they were home free. A pair of synchronous explosions from behind suggested the vehicles had hit something.

"_Arctic Claw, where are you?_ shouted Serina into the comm.

"_Inbound now! Hope you're ready for pickup, 'cause we aren't stopping for stragglers_"

The Pelican roared into view from above the dome, and plummeted rapidly groundwards. An Enforcer followed, not in the least put off by the rounds emerging from the open troop hatch. A single rocket did a bit more, blowing the machine off course, and allowing the Pelican to reach dirt alone.

"_In, in, in!_" screamed Maloski at the charging SPARTANs as she brought the aircraft to a temporary halt three metres from the ground. "_Come on, MOVE IT!_" The Chief _was_ moving it, but a blur of motion above slowed him down slightly as he dodged sideways, allowing the tiny fireball to harmlessly impact the ground. Serina made some comment about the stupidly low probability of an meteorite hitting anyone on the head, but the SPARTAN was too busy running to take much notice... beyond the bit that it happened "Once in a lifetime". With one last step and a jump, the Chief slammed onto the Pelican deck, scattering the quartet of marines watching out the back. Another thud signalled Douglas's arrival. Within seconds, Maloski had the dropship moving again, gaining height rapidly and turning for the south. The view from the back showed the Enforcer back on track, and a good twenty Sentinels had emerged from the vents midway up the dome. What a surprise; they were also moving to follow.

"Geez, what did you do to stir them up?" complained the nearest marine, HUD tag - Dean Algart. The grim looking officer with the lieutenant's insignia responded.

"Good question. Fancy enlightening us?"

"Later, marine. All I'm willing to say is that _mistakes were made_! And just out of curiosity, who started _this_ little scuffle?"

Serina seemed to have worked out the common combat denominator where marines were concerned. That probably explained the lack of joy at their "rescue". A moment later, another marine voiced another concern.

"Uh, they're catching up." The sole woman in the squad hoisted her rocket launcher, and sent one in the direction of the Enforcer. It somehow dodged out of the way, the rocket speeding on to unfairly blow an undeserved crater in the ground. "I thought Pelicans were faster than this!"

"Maloski? Tell me we can outrun this lot?"

"No can do, lieutenant!" came her voice in response. "We've got incoming hostiles from all vectors. Enforcers, Sentinels â€" you name it, they're coming. Now, hang on!"

The Pelican went into another climb, then banked sharply. The marines were prepared, tethered to the cabin walls. The SPARTANS just grabbed for hanging wrist straps with grips of iron. And as the dropship turned, the incoming flocks of Forerunner machines were revealed in all their gloryâ€|

###

#####_Guarding against Guardians_#####

Archon â€" Sector 16, Airspace

Further north were mountains capped with snow, gleaming with reflective sunlight. The lake was easily visible from here, but then there so was the entire sector. The air was chilly, frigid, arctic, and any other synonym you'd care to name. Great birds looped their solitary arcs around the peaks, gazing down for any hint of _edible_ prey. They'd long since learned the useful lesson that shiny metal things didn't make good hunting.

Among them, were a trio of Sparrowhawks. Not birds, but the three AV-22 surface attack VTOL fighters that had been successfully extracted from the _Spirit of Fire_'s dying hull. They made their own way through the high valleys, swerving around pillars of rock and generally skimming just above the snow.

"_Fire Lance 1 to Fire Lance 2 and 3. Anyone else picking up that?_"

"_Fire Lance 3, roger. If by "__**that**__" you meant the big ball of hostiles down south. Reckon it's our mark?_"

"_Fire Lance 1, affirmative. Fire Lance team, we have our bearing. Prepare for combat_."

As one, the air team banked south and began to lose altitude. Each pilot armed their weapons â€" the twin wing mounted auto-cannons and nose laser. As for the last option in the arsenal â€" the two missiles carried under each wingtip, they were left alone. The supply was somewhat limited, and the team didn't exactly trust anything turned out by the Alchemist yet. By the time this task was done, the peaks and snowline were both far behind.

The Fire Lance team dropped further, pushing all available power to their ducted air fans that served as their primary source of thrust. A team of patrolling Sentinels took an interest, but were too slow to hit the fast moving aircraft. It wasn't the first team to have such bad luck, there had been a surprising number of defensive systems up

amongst the lofty peaks, but all of them apparently needed new tracking systems.

"_Fire Lance 1, My sensor suite has an Enforcer group on scope. They're heading in the same direction as us; should we take them out on the way past_?"

"_Good idea, 2. Got that, 3_?"

"_Affirmative. Arming SPARTAN laser_."

The advanced sensor suite of Fire Lance 2 was one improvement the _Spirit_ Hawks had over the standard model used elsewhere. Some bright spark had come up with the idea of having one Hawk in every four capable of detecting enemies at much greater ranges. This could be used in conjunction with the Hawk missiles to hit enemies from far outside normal visual range. The other Fire Lance aircraft were lacking this feature, but one was enoughâ€¦ if the missiles could actually be used of course.

The Enforcers were now visible by all three aircraft, a group of five. The machines weren't completely asleep â€" the basic AI's in charge were attempting to turn around and deal with this sudden attack from behind. But they were too slow, and three expanding clouds of metal and ash were the end result of being speared by the barrage of blue bolts emitted from Hawk laser housings. Most people were unaware that a SPARTAN laser actually did its damage through an application of many small lasers, rather than the single overwhelming beam the naked eye preferred to see. To the former Enforcers this didn't exactly matter, nor did the fact that Sparrowhawk lasers were _blue_. As the aircraft shot past, the remaining two machines joined their comrades, falling in a more intact condition, but still falling. The golden mecha weren't the only thing that could try the old bullet storm.

The lake was just below now, and the Fire Lance team drew level with the water. At some unperceivable sign, they formed up into a tiny wedge, and kept on going.

"_Fire Lance 2, enemies spotted_!"

Indeed they were. A cloud of mechanical nasty's had set itself up on the south lake, and was quite happily raining a laser show in all directions. And in the centre of that cloud was a single Pelican, doing its best to avoid what it could. For now they were succeeding, but with more Sentinel groups on the scope and moving in, how long could they last without support?

â€¦

â€¦How long could they last _with_ support? Three Hawks against the current crowd was probably fine, but if the rest of them managed to link upâ€¦

The pilot of Fire Lance 1 pushed the unwelcome thoughts to the back of his mind. He was a member of the UNSC, and military pilots had to do what they could, when and where they could.

"_Fire Lance team, engage_."

###

The four tethered marines were standing side by side at the hatch, pouring what fire they could into the swarm. So far they hadn't taken any beams in return " Maloski was doing a good job in evasive matters. Of course, good luck does eventually run out, and they knew that sooner or later, one or more of them would almost certainly be hit. Still, either they steeled themselves and fired anyway, or just let the Pelican go down. Only one of those options was acceptable.

"Enforcer down, Enforcer down!" the co-pilot shouted from up front, as the chin mounted auto-cannon took another one of their dogged pursuers. At the same time, lieutenant Falgarn's assault rifle fire pushed a smaller machine back and into contact with another. Unable to untangle themselves, both Sentinels took the plunge.

"Good shot sir!" cried Private du Pluiess, hastily reloading his own weapon. A rush of heat signalled the egress of Johanne Melchos's rocket, showing another Enforcer the way to the ground. But these losses were of little consequence to the horde, which just kept coming. And what was that odd V-winged machine slipping gradually through the battle in their direction? The same one previously on flight tests to be sure, but what could it do?

Bad news would have been the Chief's guess. He and Douglas were unhappily off to the side, trying to attach their own tethers to green armour that failed to have an simple option for such exercises. Not an easy task in the midst of battle, when your transport is lurching all over the place. "And speak of the devil"

"The Pelican was harshly shoved sideways, as an Enforcer launched mortar tore past alarmingly close " so close in fact, that it took a small chunk of the Pelican with it.

"_What the HELL was THAT_"

Maloski wasn't going to let a little thing like an on-going battle stop her knowing _exactly_ what her bird was missing. Du Pluiess stared out the back, and finally became the one to work up the nerve to respond.

"Uh" you know that vehicle clamp with personalised engraving? Well, you might want to order a new one"

Thankfully, Maloski's return shout was drowned out by the next mortar screaming past, missing this time. At this rate, the question was going to be _how long_, rather than _if_ they could survive. Except"

Suddenly, a barrage of auto-cannon fire and blue laser bursts tore through the battlefield, dropping the number of enemies drastically. Maloski took the opportunity to set a straighter course, pushing the engines to the max as a trio of human aircraft flashed past.

"_Fire Lance 1, engaged_"

"_Fire Lance 2, engaging_"

"_Fire Lance 3, engaging late but in time_"

From up front, Maloski welcomed the new arrivals.

"Finally! What tourist route did you take _this_ _time_?"

"_Mountains. 2 spotted a good number of enemies blocking the direct route, so we had to improvise_."

"Save your excuses for later! We've got more hostiles joining the party!"

"_On it. Fire Lance 3, take the anomaly_."

"_Leave it to me. One scrap metal shower coming up_!"

As the Hawk's split up to take on targets of individual choosing, one showered theâ€| whatever the thing was called â€" with a shower of bullets. It seemed surprisingly easy, and the thing went into a death dive with barely a reaction. Meanwhile, the Chief had finally got himself tethered, so he stood up and prepared to give aid to his beleaguered comrades. Another team of Sentinels got past the Hawks and veered inwardsâ€| only to fall victim to the same hail of fire from the ground suddenly pelting the Pelican.

"Get back!"

Falgarn's hasty order was followed by all but the Chief, who tried to make out the source of the attack. It didn't take long, by which point the local Sentinels were all gone, and his "shield depleted" warning tone was giving him a headache. Also tethered, Douglas took his place with Point Defence shield deployed, and launched a rocket in the direction of the blooming dust cloud below. The source â€" one of the six wheeled vehicles â€" swerved out of the way and targeted another batch of Sentinels, conveniently close to a Hawk. Yes, they were harassing the aircraft, but just who was the target here?

Falgarn had the same question. "Just who are they shooting at?"

"We had similar experiences earlier," responded Serina. "Best thing to do is dodge their fire and hope it's all coincidental."

"Easier said than done!" called Maloski. "Couldn't Fire Lance do something?"

"Negative, not until we're sure. Events have transpired that we need every bit of help we can get. Until we know one way or the other, leave them alone."

The ground harassment was now aimed at an Enforcer that the Hawks had yet to get round to, saving Fire Lance 2 the trouble. The immediate Sentinels clear, all four human aircraft disengaged and accelerated away. Below them, the plains gave way to forest, and the vehicle swerved onto a road. A couple of seconds later, it stopped altogether as the tarmac and flight path diverged.

"See ya, wouldn't want to be ya!" called Algart, watching the majority of the Forerunner machines left behind descending towards the thing.

"Dean, don't antagonise the thing!"

"Sooorrry!"

The marines took the opportunity to reload, and continued watching. A single reflected gleam from the left revealed the nearest Sentinel, moving on a parallel course but in the opposite direction. Du Pluiess raised weapon, only for lieutenant Falgarn to grab his arm and shake his head. The single machine wasn't worth the effort or ammunition.

The Pelican switched vectors as it came upon the river, following the course of the rushing water. One by one, the Sparrowhawk team matched course themselves, and slipped into an inverse delta formation with the Pelican at the centre. Behind, the Sentinel groups came to a halt, seemingly unwilling to follow the escaping humans over the woods. But, there was another issueâ€¦

"Arctic Claw to Fire Lance 1, did you say something about enemies in this direction?"

"_Affirmative. We can't really take the long way back though, so we'll be punching through the middle. 2, got that targeting data ready yet_?"

"_Almost Sir. Okayâ€¦ done! Sending it to you and 3 now_!"

The Chief took a glance forward, through the cockpit. Ahead, roughly equidistant between the small air force and the relative safety of Alpha base, a _huge_ number of Enforcers were just visible, blocking the way in a vertical wall of metal. And so was the rain of mortar fire already being launched.

"Fox 2, Fox 2!"

Six missiles sped away, all converging on one small part of the Enforcer line. But even as they did so, it became painfully obvious that continuing on this course and attempting to run straight through the newly opened hole, would simply mean running straight through the mortar shower as well.

All four aircraft launched a bombardment of auto-cannon and machine gun fire at the mortars, but the number of projectiles intercepted was depressingly low. And so, only one option remained. A hurried voice came over the radio.

"_Fire Lance 1 to all aircraft, pull up, pull up!_"

Three of them did so, but the Hawk tailing just behind the Pelican was slow in reacting; couldn't resist loosing one last salvo of laser bursts. And so with grim inevitability, the mortar rain took its first victim.

"_Three is down, three is down!_"

Having cut enemy numbers by a quarter, the Enforcers ceased their long range bombardment and began moving. The first flashes of pulse beams began to flash past, even as the spiralling wreckage of Fire Lance 3 hit the ground. And then the machines were all around, with

pulse beams and claws trying to terminate the flight one after another after another.

"Come on you floating trash compacters, you don't scare me!"

"Dean Algart!" screeched Maloski, "Condition of transport 14: No attracting enemy fire through use of taunts!"

And the marines were back to blasting whatever veered close enough. The Chief and Douglas set themselves into an alternating fire pattern, each covering the other when reloading became necessary.

"_Fire Lance 2, two on my tail!_"

"_2, 1. Hold on!_"

One Hawk flashed past the hatch, trailing smoke and an Enforcer. Melchos bagged that one, but the second overeager machine roared past intact. Overeager, because the second Hawk latched onto _its_ tail and speared the machine.

"_2, you're clear!_"

"_Arctic Claw to Fire Lance, clear our line of fire!_"

The Pelican jolted back as the co-pilot launched a swarm of ANVIL-II missiles from the wing pods, the ASM's being launched in "dumb fire" mode. The following machine gun salvo tore straight through the middle of the sudden chain of explosions, taking another Enforcer. And ten more plugged the gapâ€|

"Oh, come on!"

Pulse beams were scorching more than the paintwork by now, and Maloski's continued evasive actions were putting dangerously intolerable pressures on the aircraft's frame. So it was a good thing that, all at once, the Enforcers ceased hostilitiesâ€|

"What theâ€|"

"All soldiers, cease fire!" shouted Serina over the comm. Fire Lance 1, just lining up for an auto-cannon burst, suddenly had to swerve its target instead. One wing clipped the machine, sending both into a tailspin. The Enforcer recovered rapidly, but the Hawk kept on plummetingâ€| until about two seconds from hitting the ground, when the pilot finally managed to get his machine under control and level out. His enraged voice burst back over the comm.

"_Serina? With all due respect, you'd better have a good reason for that order!_"

"I do. A message came through. I'll transmit it to you all now. Master Chief, this is particularly relevant to _you_."

The Chief groaned, and allowed her to morph the little "you've got mail!" symbol on his HUD into a full-fledged window. A small text message gradually filled itself in.

â€|

-SOLIS TO UNSC SPARTAN 117 " I HAVE MANAGED TO PERSUADE TEMPEST TO CEASE HOSTILITIES JUST THIS ONCE. HE HAS AGREED TO HONOUR THE AFORELISTED TERMS, BUT BE WARNED; ANY FUTURE CONFLICT INSTIGATED BY ANY UNSC ELEMENT ON THIS WORLD WILL BE TAKEN AS A PRETEXT FOR WAR. I WILL NOT BE ABLE TO STOP HIM AGAIN.

-PS, NOCTURNE HAS REQUESTED THAT I PASS A MESSAGE ON TO YOU. I HAVE ATTACHED THE RELEVANT AUDIO FILE.

"

So, it seemed that the blue eyed monitor called itself "Solis". And that the one calling itself "Mercurial Wisdom" was " Tempest. That explained a little. Now then, the message

Serina obliged and played it. "How unexpected, a rhyme! Who would have guessed?

"

"_Warned you we did, as we should. Is it our fault you're as thick as wood_?"

"

The information slowly sank in, as the Enforcers outside collectively turned away and cruised off.

"And what the bloody hell is that supposed to mean?" muttered private Algart. The Chief wisely stayed quiet.

###

-BLADE RECOVERY CONFIRMED. ANALYSIS UNDERWAY.

-PREPARING MARK II FOR DEPLOYMENT.

###

Archon " Sector 16, Alpha Base (Archon Occupation Day 3 " Sundown)

There was one last shock of the day, waiting for the Chief. Captain Cutter was waiting for Whiskey 399 as the Pelican touched down, the surviving Sparrowhawks settling on their own landing "pads" a short distance off. He looked weary, and perhaps a little worried

"No, he looked _very_ worried, as the Chief hopped off the back to make his report. And a moment later, with a deep breath, the Captain told him why.

"Master Chief" I have bad news. We've lost Cortana."

"

###

****Author's Notes****

And so another chapter finally comes to an end. Slightly shorter than the last, but most things are. The Encyclopedia Britannica probably is! I'll have to work on cutting the length down a bit, and getting them out on a more regular basis.

So then, this time I'll try to discuss something different.

The character of Mercurial Wisdom, or Tempest as the thing was calling itself, was perhaps one of the first concept ideas I came up with. The confrontation in the vault is only the tip of the iceberg for this character, so expect to be seeing quite a bit more of it. Needless to say, anything that it voices should be looked at carefully. The mannerisms and other visual efforts might be worth watching as well.

Originally, the version I was planning to write was somewhat briefer on the accusations front, but as I checked deeper into the Halo wiki, I started finding out new information that slotted in well. It's easy to think that Wisdom has a point, but don't listen too much to it. Humans have a lot more of a role in the universe than it believes, and one of those will be revealed later. Part of it, is related to genetics— you didn't think that single reference was the whole basis for the title, did you? It's actually the second reference, but the other hasn't been spelt out.

The tussle in the containment vault probably warrants a mention. It may have got a little confusing, but that was partially intentional. Flood vs. Sentinels vs. human vs. mysteries. I'd say this is where faction relationships are going to start taking off. Try predicting where they're going, but don't be surprised if my mind comes up with something pretty warped for the actual result.

It's difficult to write combat scenes that don't get repetitive, or plagiarise someone else's work, so expect me to try various different combat scenarios from here on. I know that the Chief shouldn't really sit out on these battles though, so his role in them should be more influential from here on. But I'm working hard on preventing him from becoming some sort of invincible demi-god. Play a game on heroic, that's the sort of difficulty I'm trying to write it as. More emphasis will be going on dodging fire than relying on the shields to soak it up.

If you're wondering when the Hawk's gained the capability to use missiles, I used a certain bit of art from the Halo wiki for reference. It clearly shows two missiles beneath the nearer wing, and we can safely assume there's another two on the other side. Just because they didn't use them in game, doesn't mean they don't have them full stop.

Oly Oly Oxen Free is a little bit of sing song the SPARTAN II's use as an unofficial "all clear" signal. It can be whistled, tapped, or just plain spoken. It only shows up in the books though, which is why I'm explaining. Theoretically, some people will only have played the games.

Anyway, I'll leave you to think about the end of phase "bombshell". What happened? Well, there's a couple of clues hidden in this chapter—

â€|And I think we can all safely agree that I am rubbish at these "Author's Notes" sections!

-Next Phase: Chasing Ghosts, Finding Phantoms.

7. Phase 7: Chasing Ghosts, Finding Phantom

****Halo: Genetics****

Disclaimer: If, Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy style, I owned a time machine, travelled back in time fifteen odd years and did something tricky on the legal front, I could theoretically own Halo. But, dreams are dreams, so I'll leave it the property of _343 Industries_.

But there are a couple of things I_** did **_create for this fanfic; the characters _Joseph "Jitters" Lenkin_, the foul mouthed _Samantha Gordez_, tag along _Drane_, _Carther_ and his squad, anyone in the female dominated _Larront_ squad, "screw loose" _Nocturne_, "staying where it's safe" _Solis_, "here for the comedy" _Patab_, unlucky in love _Falgarn_â€| and the other band of _outsiders_. Archon itself is mine, even if the concept is anything _but_ new. Dire Thorns? I'll let you figure that one outâ€|

****Phase 7: Chasing Ghosts, Finding Phantoms****

Archon â€" Sector 16, Alpha Base (Archon Occupation, Day 4 â€" Early Morning)_

"_Yah! Ow! Ee!_"(Crash)

"There he goes againâ€|"

" _Ulp! Eek! Wouch!_"(Crunch)

â€|

"_Owww_â€|"

Marine entertainment can be somewhatâ€| odd at times. Lewd jokes aplenty? Par for course if you ask me. Getting a little too obsessed with equipment? Happens quite often behind closed tent flaps. Physical jokes getting a little tooâ€| danger ridden? Yeah, it happens. Just stay clear of anyone with a slasher grin, or anyone who skulks in corners and cackles. Watching the silent ones, that could be a good idea too. Always the ones who you least expect after all, and you should _never_ judge a book by its coverâ€|

But this time, the two marines with nothing to do were indulging in a _fairly_ harmless pastime â€" watching a certain diminutive alien make a laughing stock of himself. But you had to give the poor critter points for effort. As they continued to look on, it got up, shook itself in a manner not dissimilar to a dog, and began attempting to climb the sizeable rock pile sitting on the outskirts of Alpha Base _yet again_.

"Funny, you'd have thought he'd have learnt by now. What is this, fifth or sixth time now?"

"Seventh. What I don't get, is why he's having so much trouble in the first place. The little buggers were perfectly fine at mountaineering back on Harvest."

"Were they? You know, I didn't notice, _what with them shooting at us_!"

"Yep. The blighters gave us a nasty shock in the mountains, getting the drop on us from every "officer deemed unreachable" perch we could find. The only reason I don't hate the things would be the reactions that behaviour got from our bully squad leaders! That, and they were such poor shots."

The conversation broke off as Patab, wearing what could only be described as a single minded look of determination, reached a certain obstacle. This innocuous looking outcrop of granite was singleâ€¦|_not_handedlyâ€¦| responsible for a good two thirds of the previous tumbling failures. In a strangely mineral way, it was the Grunt's nemesis, at least for the moment.

"Well, got the popcorn ready?"

"Nope. Will a ration bar do?"

"â€¦|I'll let you work out my answer to that oneâ€¦| Hey, he cleared it!"

Indeed Patab had, scrambling slowly around the outcrop and continuing upwards. Other marines watching could be seen exchanging various small items; long out of date currency of various nations, that rarest of commodities â€" surviving chocolate, even the odd personal effects were being passed on (albeit grudgingly) to new owners. Some people _really_ needed to learn where to stop gambling!

"Well, can't say I'm surprised. A black sheep that one may be, but I'd be very surprised if he couldn't master something as rudimentary as climbing a pile of rocks!"

It was interesting, when you considered the long conflicts on Harvest, Arcadia and thatâ€¦| other world, how quickly Patab was going from a simple glare magnet, to something more akin to the baseâ€¦| uh, _pet_. The Unggoy was just so disarmingly endearing, in a vaguely alien way. True, a good percentage of the base would still rather shoot him, and try a little cookery to remove the evidence, but someone would find out sooner or later. And when they did, popular opinion would come down on the perpetrator (or _perpetrators_ â€" it was unlikely they'd get the courage to try such an action alone) like a ton of bricks.

"_Whoa_!"

And then Patab made his mistake. Pausing on a little ledge to do what looked suspiciously like a victory dance, the Grunt fell victim to the inevitable slip. Cue, the next round of bumping and banging. The marines watched him tumble, team pet suddenly back to being the butt monkey.

"Then again, maybe this one's just specialâ€¦|"

###

Also out and about, strolling rapidly along on his morning inspection of Alpha Base, captain Cutter glanced at the sight of a certain alien picking itself up, quietly chuckled, and kept on walking. His escort, engrossed in the spectacle as they were, momentarily got left behind. But they soon came to their senses, and clumsily hastened back into formation.

So, the Grunt guards were taking their charge out on little excursions, were they? He'd heard the rumours regarding the new cleaner for the mess tent, but he hadn't been exactly sure what to think of them. And by the time his considerable duties had allowed him the privilege of stopping by for dinner, the alien had been notable for its absence. And then the subsequent visit to the prison tent had found the Grunt sleeping. With soapy hands.

Now, did he approve? ... Well, there was no real harm to granting the Grunt his exercise he supposed, providing the guards did indeed keep an eye on him, but the passing over of menial tasks had to stop. Prisoners had rights after all. Although, the prisoner's welfare was currently the least of Cutter's problems...

It seemed, that every short 10 hour day that passed by brought more bad news to snap at human heels. Secretly, Cutter was starting to get more than a little fed up of this little trend, but he wasn't going to let it show. One thing about the human psyche, it was extremely difficult to stop it fighting back against an unjust universe. The Covenant had learned that the hard way, and with time, this "Mercurial Wisdom" was going to too.

Assuming, that they broke the "rules" in any case. Although it wasn't really an "if", more of a "when". Obviously the humans would try to take advantage of this period of grace for as long as possible, tip toeing around the very edge of the restrictions as much as possible, but sooner or later something would have to give. The alternative, was permanent exile. And no one could stomach that idea... or perhaps more accurately, no one could stomach the idea of swallowing that so called "nutrient soup" Wisdom had delivered for the rest of their lives. If the catering staff could figure out something to do with it, that was fair enough, but the Sentinel delivery squad weren't going to be getting any tips until the stuff at least tasted edible.

Turning a corner, the captain passed a familiar sight, a certain female scientist and a certain male marine. He didn't even have to look to confirm the man's identity, there was only one who had even considered trying an approach. Illogical ghost stories! Anders turned her back on him and began to walk off, the latest rebuke finished with... not that the acting lieutenant had the same opinion. Silas Falgarn muttered something under his breath, a comment that remained indistinguishable to Cutter, but crucially, not to Anders. She whirled on him, and gave a blistering retort.

"Frankly, Falgarn, if you were the last man on Earth, I'd be suspicious!"

It was the delivery that gave the otherwise jokey line its "whumph" factor. And without waiting for an answer, the professor turned her back on the spluttering marine and stormed off. Another marine

passing in the opposite direction gave Falgarn a "sorry mate, but better you than me" look, and kept on going. Cutter meanwhile, had his next stop in sight.

"Any change, Stuart?" he asked, popping into the cluttered Intelligence tent. The navy tech on duty looked up from his crouched position on the floor, instinctively made to salute... and gave up as his elbow impacted the side of a somewhat unyielding metal crate serving as... well, a coffee table at the moment.

"No Sir, just the voice rambling on."

He quickly passed up his clipboard, and went back to fiddling with the keyboard in front of him. A host of wires snaked away, entering and leaving various different portable processors scattered about his corner of the tent.

"Cracks all around, from sky to the ground..?" Cutter read out loud. His eyes scanned down the sheet, noting the lack of coherent, _understandable_ lines. Just verse upon verse of rhyme. The news of two Forerunner overseers at odds to the one that had all but declared war on the humans _would_ have been good news, had one of them been more noticeable, and the other _not_ a rambling idiot. This Nocturne had been filling the air waves with nonsense for the last three hours flat, mostly repeating itself over and over, but even so a new verse occasionally showed up.

And as he thought about that, a new one did indeed come in, the tech gesturing for the clipboard. Cutter passed it back, the tech immediately transcribing another set from his headset, mumbling the words aloud as he did so. Maybe this one would actually be lucid.

"_I wonder, I do, of many things,_
Especially now, when my comrade sings,
An obvious threat, all may see,
Yet I see further â€" a peril to flee."

Well, so much for that hope. True, it was understandable, but it meant nothing without context.

...

Things were _so_ much simpler when all they had to fight was the Covenant...

###

Archon â€" Orbit _ (Archon Occupation, Day 4 â€" Early Morning)_

In cosmic terms, orbit was only a short distance away from the local Alpha base. But, there was virtually no way to reach it short of expending _far_ too much Pelican booster fuel. Short of the planet being threatened by imminent destruction, there was little chance of any humans wandering up to take a look.

Which was all very well, for _some_ people anyway. If people was the

right term.

Quietly parked in one of the empty Spirit of Fire launch bays, a pair of intruders had set up shop. One of the imitation harriers sat wedged between two Scorpion main battle tanks, while another was resting quite undisturbed in the open space recently vacated by a Sparrowhawk VTOL. While most of the mystery pilots had branched out to do a little "examination" of the modified Phoenix class colony ship's interior, they had at least left one of their number on board each of their craft â€" insurance against unexpected hijackers. Said pilots, were now bored.

There was little to do out here, with nothing to look at but Archon and the distinctly beaten up human vehicles scattered around the cavernous bay. They'd already discovered how the humans had got three Sparrowhawks to manoeuvre in a vacuum for the brief period required to reach the atmosphere â€" jury rigged Pelican thrusters units had been slapped on the side of the single one still in the bay. They could only be useable for an appallingly low amount of time before the fuel ran out, but they only needed to get to a certain depth in the atmosphere, then the regular fan drives could take over. Still an appallingly crude method, but it worked.

And with that mystery solved, the two pilots were left with a simple choice â€" the same old word games again, or listening to the continuing Forerunner broadcast. They'd chosen the latter, not wanting yet more thinking reliant activities. Not the best choice they'd ever made, because some of those verses were annoyingly thought inducing themselves.

"Cracks all around? Bit of a coincidence, that one?"

"Maybe. It could be just be the words of another loony ready for the asylum."

"Right... You do know what normally happens when people ignore the so called mad men?"

"Yes..?"

"Plus, that "Hallowed light" line seems a little close to the mark as well."

"Really? That one could mean __**anything**__."

...

And, almost as if prompted, yet another verse showed up. A little fragmented from the imperfect reception in here, but enough managed to get through.

"#####ty fragments, answers ab####,

*ut which questions match, w**# #egions surround_?"

...

"Satisfied yet_?"

###

#####Needle in a Haystack#####

Archon, Sector 16 â€" Southwest Hydroelectric facility (Archon Occupation, Day 4 â€" Early Morning)

Silence... Was nowhere to be found around here, much to the Chief's disgust. The previously nonexistent wildlife (not counting a certain two types of predator) had finally woken up, and suddenly the woodland was alive with chirps, whistles, and rustling undergrowth. Add that to the continuous roar of the river, and his eyes were the only reliable warning system... unless the Serina re-tuned the motion tracker _not_ to pick up every hopping bird and scampering mouse.

He'd been on the move for about an hour now, trekking along the river and up through the forest. He'd failed to sight _any_ Thorns, and most of the river was worryingly clear of the expected Forerunner observers, which gave him the distinctly uneasy feeling that something was up. The lack of potential ambush sites by the side of this hydroelectric facility didn't make him feel any safer.

The chatter in the camp last night had been worrying. Little snippets of conversation overheard here and there, they all fit together to form a clear picture. The avian attack on Scout team Bravo. The little device implanted in a Thorn brain. It didn't take a genius to figure out that the two events were related. It was also pretty clear who'd set the whole thing up. Step 1: steer a Thorn towards potential prey in a subtle fashion. Step 2: watch and learn of enemy capabilities. And when that was done, the same method could easily be used to spy on your opponents... how many creatures had Wisdom influenced that way? Was he even now being watched, the artificial intelligence using some rodent as an organic camera?

Serina stirred in the back of his mind.

"Wouldn't work." she said, sounding weary. "From the reports I'd say the chip could only be used to _guide_ an animal. It wasn't connected to the optic nerve. Plus, rodents are a little small for that kind of thing."

She lapsed back into silence, leaving the Chief to work out the flaws in that analysis. There weren't many. But he had other things to worry about, as he passed a Sentinel pad sitting by the side of the dirt track. One of the machines raised itself off the pad to look at him as he marched by, but didn't try anything threatening. _How reassuring_.

The truth of the matter, was that it wasn't the Sentinels, or the Thorns, or even the still unnamed avians that concerned him. He could fight them quite easily if it came to it. No, what was _really_ _bugging_ him, was the possibility that at any moment, a small bulbous thing or fifty could come skittering out of a ditch and swarm him. Considering there had been no news whether Wisdom had managed to keep the Flood locked up, he couldn't help but fear for the worst.

He trudged onwards and past the end of the facility, trying to pick up the pace. A Sentinel is a hard thing to track, particularly when there are thousands of the things swarming around. He still couldn't

quite believe the scale of the task he'd taken upon himself, but one way or another he'd see it through.

"You'd better. I don't want that flawed copy of myself running things back with the captain forever. She changed directions here, new heading due east. Fancy a swim?"

The Chief looked forwards. Directly in front of him, across the road and beach, lay the lake. If Serina was telling the truth â€" and he had no reason to disbelieve her â€" the Sentinel Cortana had quietly hijacked had gone straight down the middle of it. Not that he was entirely sure how Serina was tracking it â€" she'd given some story of following a faint electrical after trace, carefully untangling its trail from all of the others, but that sounded a little unreliable to him. But then, unreliable or not, it was the only lead he had. And he had to get Cortana back, whatever it took.

Serina was along for the ride again, this time with clear orders from the captain. In the meantime, the captain was being assisted by a copy of her, created using files left in the MJOLNIR by Cortana. It was a rather crude copy â€" dumb AI level only, but it would be enough. Last time the requisite software had been used, Cortana had ended up flooding the Unyielding Hierophant's network with clones of herself, bringing the entire system to a screeching standstill. And that was entirely unplanned for, but she'd been foolish enough to give the original copy its own version of the cloning software. Serina, hadn't made that mistake.

Now, what to do...

The sound of engines reached his ears, as he turned to see a trio of Warthogs approach from behind. One pulled up alongside, another SPARTAN standing up in the rear.

"Get on." he said abruptly, gesturing to the Chief. Guessing that Douglas had a right to be annoyed after being left behind again, the Chief wordlessly complied. He settled into position behind the cab, allowing Douglas to go back to manning the LAAG. A quick glance around, checking the IFF tags as he went, told him that a Hog each belonged to the Lenkin, Carther and Larront teams. The Larront Hog was holding four marines again, but the other two each had the more normal three... and two SPARTANS in Lenkin's case. The woman at sitting opposite the Chief was complaining about the lack of space; some particularly foul language was drifting over. He wasn't entirely sure that those were all real words... but they sounded real, which was all that really mattered he supposed.

"Which way?" Lenkin called from up front, confirming the Chief's suspicions that this substantial team was here to support him in his quest. He took a moment to consider the options â€" they could either follow the lake shore to the north or south, with the supposed Sentinel route being roughly equidistant between them, and then rejoin its heading wherever it had returned to land. But it wasn't really a difficult choice, not with the Flood Containment Facility on the south shore. So there had been no confirmed breakout, well there hadn't been confirmation that all Flood were still safely locked up inside either. It only took one Infection form to get out to seriously ruin someone's day.

"North." he said. "Keep to the road."

"You're the boss."

The three Warthogs quickly moved out, allowing the Chief to finally do some thinking of his own.

###

Archon, unknown location _ (Archon Occupation, day 4 â€" Early morning)_

It was a small room, yet it served its purpose well. Buried deep within the mountains, in an expansive subterranean complex used by Tempest as the primary Archon control centre, it was an unexpected place of safety. The room was bare, a circular void barely ten metres across and three tall. There was only one access route â€" a vertical shaft too narrow for any roving Sentinels to wander down, which disgorged its users out of the otherwise unblemished wall. Beyond this and a single raised holotank in the centre of the room, nothing.

Faint, slowly shifting lighting played across the gleaming surface of the room's only occupant, as it pondered recent developments. Its blue eye was blank, unseeing, the owner aware of nothing but its own internal turmoil. Solis was in its element here, in its personal, secret meditation vault. But even in this place of peace, wisps of unrest continued to twirl around its core.

Tempest, was beginning to gain momentum. Somewhat mentally unbalanced from past events, it was becoming harder and harder for Solis and, to a lesser extent, Nocturne, to keep their associate under a reasonable amount of control. The recent debacle in the Containment Vault was only the first of what was no doubt going to be a long chain of disasters. You had to give Tempest credit â€" it did truly believe that it had just reasons behind its actions, but it failed to understand that the means were not justified by the end result. And that was why Solis opposed its brethren â€" not because it disagreed with the motives, but because it knew that Tempest's methods were heavy handed in the extreme.

Nocturne, was unfortunately of little help. It spent most of its active time behaving all mystical, and generally doing nothing else. True, some of the "forecasts", as Nocturne had occasionally referred to them as, seemed to have a valid point, but it was hard to take anything seriously when it was worded in such a ridiculous way. Tempest downright ignored it, citing the continued rhymes as yet more evidence that its associate was unfit for responsibility. Which made it all the more annoyed when Nocturne sided with Solis, and started outright blocking (or worse, undoing) its activities. Nocturne was difficult to work with, and downright frustrating when it just wandered off to do its own thing, but it was quite competent when it set its mind to things. When being the operative word.

...So, Tempest had managed to trick the human, despite the warnings. Understandable, all things considered, although the sheer foolishness of the human was almost absurd. What concerned Solis more, was the roaming band of walking Sentinel killers and their support, all of which had somehow managed to escape the Containment facility. After Tempest had nearly taken another mass enhanced plasma round to the face, it had wisely chosen to retreat. At which point, the Sentinels

had become somewhat less combat efficient due to a lack of direct control, and the outsiders got out. The Flood... well, they hadn't got out of the facility yet, but the security teams were still checking to see if they'd found a way to escape the central vault. Logically, there wasn't one, but after the Forerunner " Flood war, making assumptions was not the right way to go.

Solis paused, and looked towards the holotank. At the moment, the device was generating an extremely dim, three dimensional map of Sector 16. Gold dots represented important facilities, while red specks showed the locations of the humans. Most of them were clumped together in their "Alpha base", but there were two groups slowly moving further out " one quite large one just a little out and heading in the direction of the crashed human ship, and the other up north, by the shore of Pryda lake (a silly name, but the Forerunners had given it, so the designation stayed).

Solis' eye narrowed, as it called up the camera image from a Sentinel in the vicinity of the latter. Three human vehicles, moving hastily along the lakeside road. It recognised the humans in the back of the lead vehicle, and wasn't entirely sure it was happy about their direction. They hadn't broken any of Tempest's rules yet, but something told it that the possibility was all too real. Perhaps a little chat would be appropriate...

And another thing " reports had come in of a small security group (six Sentinels and a pair of Enforcers) having gone missing. The last Solis or Nocturne (Tempest refused to share its knowledge) had heard of them was a report that they were investigating a Sentinel Major with outdated security codes. Now the Major was still visible on sensors, but the patrol wasn't. How... _curious_.

Something was up. As if it didn't have enough to worry about, what with Tempest, outsiders and Flood. For now, all it could do was wait and see...

A wave of dread suddenly insinuated itself into the Monitor's internal circuits, causing its own surge of irrational fear. Solis recognised the feeling, and knew exactly what it meant. Without a word, it glided into the access shaft and began to ascend.

A change was coming...

###

Archon " Sector 16, Northern shore of Pryda lake (Archon Occupation, Day 4 " Late Morning)

"Funny looking thing. I never thought I'd say it, but Anders would be good around about now. She'd have some idea what it was for."

The three Warthogs had slowed down somewhat, as the road narrowed and began to hug the shoreline " tarmac edge to rippling water. It wasn't doing much for the Chief's state of mind, not with the Cortana occupied Sentinel potentially opening the gap between them, but it was allowing the humans to look at their surroundings with greater detail. At the moment, their attention was on a small antenna, sitting on a tall thin rock a little offshore. The bulky segment at the bottom was clearly a generator from the low humming noise it was giving out, but the rest of the mast's purpose was proving more

resistant to analysis.

"Anders?" griped Serina, more alert now than she had been when the Chief had been on foot, "What about _me_?"

"Uh, sorry Ma'am, forgot you were there."

The Chief sensed Serina bristle, but only for a moment. Then the desire to prove her superiority took the fore.

"The thing's linked in some way to the Alchemist â€" you see that gadgetry up top? Very reminiscent of the equipment on the Alchemist's roof. If I had access to the circuitry I'd tell you more, but I want this mission over as fast as possible. Then maybe I'll finally be able to take up safer accommodation."

The Warthogs rounded a corner, and the mast was lost to view. Not too far ahead, the mountains reached right up to the lake's shore, with the road being accommodated by a rather small looking ledge in the base of a sheer cliff face. There was no change to the Chief's outwards visage, but his mood took another turn for the worse. Serina apparently had a similar reaction.

"Just _great_. _Another_ reason to imitate a slug."

"Slug?" Carther responded, "Don't you mean _snail_?"

"No, I mean _slug_. Or didn't you know they were slower than snails?"

Carther's lack of response told her everything she needed to know. From his position behind his LAAG he called something up front, presumably telling his driver to _stop laughing_. She ignored him. The Chief took the opportunity to ask Serina something.

"So, why have you suddenly cheered up?"

"Simple," she responded to his ears alone, as the little convoy reached the cliff and... _didn't_ slow down. "I've got something I'd like to say to your AI when we finally catch up with her."

The Chief didn't like the sound of that, and would have rather she didn't elaborate. But of course, she couldn't care less about his personal preferences.

"Simply put, I know why I had that little issue on landing. The lapse of operation when the Captain needed it most. It was her fault."

"Come again?"

"Don't you know? You can't have more than one smart AI working in any one area, we interfere with each other's operation... don't ask me how â€" I'd have to lie, and I don't like doing that. Anyway, when you brought your AI into Alpha base, I shut down only to wake up again when you physically removed me three miles from her presence. Why her range of interference was that far, and why I was the one to be suppressed I don't know, but I suspect it can be attributed to her time with the Gravemind... can I stop now? Trying to dumb down this down to your level is giving me a headache."

Actually, the Chief was already aware of this. Dã©jã had taught the young proto SPARTAN II's about AI operations, including that little titbit. No explanation had been offered then either, but he'd always assumed, seeing as interference hadn't been mentioned, that it had been an issue in supplying enough power.

...And then they'd gone to Chi Ceti-4 with the _UNSC Commonwealth _to receive their first MJOLNIR (the mark IV), and seen twelve AI's working together. That had pretty much blown that theory out of the water, and he'd dropped the conundrum from his mind. Now, he supposed they'd been dumb AI's.

The Warthogs turned another left hand corner, giving a view of another headland about thirty seconds away. Douglas still hadn't forgiven the Chief enough to start talking, so he looked out to the lake again, just in time to see another set of ripples spreading out... from multiple points. A spout of water too, somewhere near the centre, which was what got Samantha Gordez's attention. But no one else noticed; by the time she'd opened her mouth to swear, the plume had gone.

Around the next corner, and the road passed across a pleasant, steep sided canyon penetrating a fair distance into the mountain before ending abruptly at a scree slope. The place was thickly wooded, long grass covering the ground beneath the speckled canopy. It almost looked too perfect to be true, and the Chief sensed foul play. He'd have been perfectly happy to get out of there as fast as physically possible, but a shout back from Carther's leading Hog put paid to that idea. The little convoy ground to a halt, just shy of the next corner.

"What's the problem, Carther?" Lenkin called.

"Well, we might be lacking a road. Seems we've got a minor landslide blocking the way."

"Oh fucking great." Samantha grumbled. "That road was long enough as it was without having to follow the shit thing again."

"Well, good thing we don't have to then. There's a couple of our friends working on clearing it now. I'd say we've got fifteen minutes, then we can get going again."

"Ah good stuff!" Smith announced from the rear Hog. "Time for a bog break?"

"Bog break?" repeated Angela Larront slowly, looking puzzled. Then she realised what her subordinate was getting at. "Oh, call of nature. You could have said. Fine, but don't take too long."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Smith answered, gathering his MA5 and grenades, and hopping out. He starting moving in a rather awkward fashion towards the tree line.

"Don't let the Dire's bite!" came a mocking call from Heather Fawlke, Carther's driver. Smith paused.

"That's what these are for." he remarked, fingering the fragmentation

grenades attached to his belt, and resuming his march. The Chief watched him disappear, before jumping out himself and moving carefully forward. He reached Carther's Warthog, and slowly poked his head around the corner. Sure enough, the road just beyond was blocked, but matters were indeed in hand. One boulder at a time, a pair of Enforcers were slowly translocating the pile into the lake using their underside claws. One looked at the Chief, and promptly got back to work. That was hopefully a good sign that human-Wisdom relations hadn't broken down completely, even with said humans running around this far north east of their camp, and the Chief withdrew before he made some trivial error that could be easily reinterpreted in a negative fashion.

The marines were busy doing the usual thing (i.e. talking garbage), all but Drane, who was busy with something else entirely. Standing at the edge of the road, completely unfazed by the rather pointy rocks directly below him, he had his eyes to a pair of binoculars. The Chief followed the marine's line of vision to an island about a mile away. There was another of Archon's many facilities perched in the centre, a tall structure that could only be described as "jagged". But looking again, the Chief noted the binoculars were aimed at something a little to the side of the building.

"Whatcha looking at?" asked a likeminded Carther, glancing in Drane's direction. "Got anything interesting?"

"No, just a couple of birds. Think I'll keep an eye on them."

Someone sniggered, which was what it took to finally get Drane's eyes unglued from his little toy.

"Not that kind of bird! Who do you think I am? â€¦ Don't answer that!" he added, seeing Carther begin to open his mouth.

Now that he knew what to look for, the Chief could see the large specks circling the distant tower. As long as they stayed there, he was fine with that. And with that thought, another distraction came in the form of Private Smith, stumbling from the slopes above. He was clutching something, and his face was somewhere between ashen with shock and just plain confused. An odd mix, but one that he still managed to pull off with aplomb. Only the SPARTANs noticed, until the marine stumbled up and dropped his cargo in front of them.

It was, at first glance, nothing special. Certainly nothing that should have brought out that sort of reaction, even if it seemed to be made from crockeryâ€¦ and then the observers noted the strange markings. Markings that looked strangely regular. Markings that looked strangelyâ€¦ familiar.

"â€¦esuviuâ€¦" murmured Serina.

"â€¦and that is supposed to mean?" asked Lenkin. Then, the true significance of what she had said impacted. English letters? On a piece of rubbish, on a world supposedly not touched by human hands?

"Oh... Shit. Where did you find it?"

"Up that way," Smith pointed at the steep sided slope of the canyon,

somewhere in the forest on the right. "Metal fragments all other the place, but I didn't think much of it 'till I was midway through my... business... and I spotted this."

The Chief looked upwards again, realising now how this canyon must have been formed. An indeterminate amount of time ago, a human starship must have come screaming in at a frankly astonishingly low angle, and ploughed into the cliffs. Over the years vegetation would have moved in to cover up the damage, but there was no way it could undo that much destruction. But there were a few other questions "€" which ship had made it out here, what had happened to the crew, and... just where was this derelict?

...

Actually, he could only suppose that the ship had been quietly dismantled by Mercurial Wisdom, its component parts carried off for analysis elsewhere. But that still left the first two questions.

The others had come to similar conclusions.

"Fucking great." muttered Samantha. "How many bleeding ships do we reckon that bastard machine has lured here?"

...

"Actually," Serina finally contributed to the awkward silence. "I suspect just two. Forward unto Dawn got here by accident, so just us and the... I'd say this one was called the Vesuvius. Nothing else really fits. But none of the records I've got access to mention a Vesuvius, not even the CMA or civilian ones."

"Insurrectionist?" asked Douglas, jumping on the obvious.

"Maybe. Or it could just be something that entered service after we left Arcadia... but then I'd expect to find some trace of it in the Master Chief's records "€" he's served with most of our entire fleet in the last twenty five years. Maybe ONI would know, but I don't."

"Do we have any ONI on board?"

Carther looked at Mira Larront with a look of pure horror, as Serina responded:

"It's possible. As much as I claim to know everything about everyone, I've got better things to do than deep scan every crewmembers file for signs of ONI tampering."

Carther outright began to grumble.

"You know Smith," he said, "I would have rather you hadn't gone off for a "bog break". Then you wouldn't have found that bit of scrap, then we wouldn't have had this discussion, and then I wouldn't be worrying about ONI spooks watching everything I do!"

"Uh, priorities, Carther?"

"I think I've got them the right way round, thank you very much."

A low rumbling interrupted, almost inaudible to the naked ear. Its source was immediately apparent, as two Enforcers flew past. Wordlessly, Tara Speek took her leave, and ventured towards the corner, and the formerly blocked road beyond. A brief glance was all it took, before the oriental woman gestured a thumbs up.

The remaining marines, and the SPARTANs, began mounting up.

"In my opinion," Lenkin announced over the comm., "we're soldiers â€" we're paid to fight, not think. Perhaps we'd better leave this enigma to our resident specialist."

"Sure," muttered Serina, "Leave me all the hard work, why don't you. I don't mind.

"... Much more than having to run a ship anyway."

###

The Warthogs carried on, now with even more to think about. The road zigzagged along the cliff base for another half mile, before the next distraction materialised.

A giant cave mouth, a low but exceedingly wide semicircular gap in the mountain's base allowing the lake ingress into its mysterious depths. The road leapt to the other side on a flimsy looking bridge before carrying on, while a wide, heavy duty offshoot veered left and into the darkness. There wasn't much light in there, a mere couple of dim globes visible somewhere far in, but machines didn't need it. There was no sign of movement either; whether that was a good thing or not was up for debate.

...This wasn't the distraction though.

As the Hogs began to cross the bridge, the Chief was yanked rudely from his continued musing, when Lenkin's Hog disintegrated beneath him! If it hadn't been for his superb reflexes, the SPARTAN would have thumped hard to ground just as the marines were doing so. Hard. As it was, he only just managed a clumsy looking roll that would have got Serina tutting, had it not been for the greater issue. Just what had happened to the vehicle?

"Hell's fucking Bells! What shit did you pull this time, Jitters?"

Well, a certain marine was apparently no worse for wear... although the pile of gloop that the Warthog had transformed itself into had probably acted as a cushion. It also let the Chief know that this particular vehicle was a product of the Alchemist. Other bodies were raising themselves out of the mess, just as Carther's vehicle pulled up behind. For once, no one on board was laughing. One of the silver gloop covered marines levering himself upright gasped in pain and fell back in, prompting another to make a rough dive for his ailing comrade.

"Okay, unexpected." Serina murmured, before continuing out loud. "Status?"

"I'm fine," responded Lenkin, "but Drane's got a problem. Where does it hurt Drane?"

"Forearm... burning. Might be...broken."

"Fickin' magical Warthogs" Samantha grumbled, as she retrieved the teams med. kit from the gloom. She tossed it to Lenkin, who silently began trying to construct a splint from the various bits of metal wire that everyone had been wondering why it was included. Well, now they knew.

"How's it going. Lenkin?" called Carther, dismounting and walking over, his gunner following. Lenkin didn't even look up to respond. In the battle between him and the wire, the wire was winning.

"This probably isn't what Drane would say, but nothing _too_ serious, considering what just happened."

"Yeah, well I never trusted that technology anyway. Now we've got the little issue of wondering which Hogs are real and which are imitation. Don't want that happening again, do we?"

"Any idea why it happened?" asked Heather, making one of her rare contributions to serious discussion.

No one answered that one. Serina murmured something about destabilisation, but the Chief couldn't hear exactly what. Soon though, something useful _did_ come out of her nonexistent mouth.

"I suppose it could be... something to do with range from the Alchemist facility. Maybe they can't maintain their form if you get too far away... are you missing anything else?"

Samantha did a brief check, sifting through the dispersing pool. After various items had been located and catalogued, she did a few mental calculations, and announced her findings.

Four fragmentation grenades, six MA5 clips and one Magnum short... all dropped to us last night. We've been fucking swindled!"

"No, they must have been Alchemist creations as well. The disintegration occurred six metres onto the bridge, Larront's Warthog had already passed that point so we can assume it's a real one-"

"Actually," contributed Smith, "The Warthog may be fine, but my new Magnum appears to have given up the ghost as well. I'd say you're on to something ma'am!"

"Of course I am. So, we need to check the last Hog. Private Fawlke, go ahead!"

"Uh, yes ma'am."

The second Warthog began to inch forward, until the last marine of Carther's team ran up alongside and, after a moment's discussion, swapped places with her. No one else heard anything from the exchange, but they got the general gist. Especially when Heather made a certain remark, as she watched the Hog.

"Maybe chivalry isn't quite dead after all!"

Lenkin had finally managed to complete his "splint", and helped Drane shakily to his feet. As the entire human team watched the moving vehicle begin to pass its former duplicate, Douglas quietly moved up, getting ready to catch the driver should things go really pear shaped. Everyone was aware that there had only been nine real Warthogs in the human arsenal... and now down to seven with the loss of Scout Team Bravo and their vehicles to those birds. Which made it all the more likely that this one was about to stop playing charades. Naturally, everyone was expecting such a result. They were not disappointed.

With a sickening gurgle, the front of the Hog suddenly changed colour to shimmering silver, the effect rushing to the back in under a second. For a moment, it held its form, but then the whole thing just collapsed under its own weight, throwing the driver to the ground. SPARTAN reactions were not quite good enough to grab him, but Douglas was still in time to stop the unfortunate marine from rolling off the side of the bridge.

Of course, the marine had other things on his mind. It seemed that Douglas had forgotten his own strength, and broken something. Namely an ankle. Unlike Drane, the poor soul didn't let on, until his right leg gave way under him and leaving Douglas supporting something close to "deadweight" (as inaccurate as that description was). Carther moved up, and got the med. kit, giving the SPARTAN a glare. Then he too, began to untangle the reel of wireâ€| with rather less success.

Looking to get his mind back to the mission, Serina returned to the transport issue.

"So, one Gauss armed Warthog, twelve people. I expect even you can see that this could be difficult."

"Not necessarily," commented Lenkin, glancing into the vast cave. "I see movement in there. And I'm pretty sure that hum isn't natural."

_Hum? â€| Oh, __**that**__ hum. Guess the corporal must have pretty good hearingâ€|_ That, or maybe his former jumpy personality was making a resurgence. Not that he'd been told much on that, but he'd seen similar cases earlier in his career, so it wasn't too hard to spot in Lenkin. Still, how did that relate to transport? Lenkin soon answered that for him, with another question.

"Carther? Should we take this opportunity to go take a look?"

"With two injured men? I don't think the captain would approve."

"Well," Serina interjected into the little dispute, "If you split into two groups, say the injured together with an uninjured guard stay here until extraction can arrive, the rest of you could investigate with a clean conscienceâ€| Corporal Gordez, you can take the guard duty."

"_What the frikking hell? How do you compute that?_"

Even if there was no actual expletive in that second sentence (even Samantha's approach to language didn't extend to insulting a clear

superior), she still managed to infuse it with an insane amount of vehemence. As such, Serina was stunned into silence " something that, any other time, would have been a moment of bliss to everyone else. But despite Samantha's initial success, despite her extreme stubbornness and unwillingness to give up (the very factor Serina had based her decision on), she hadn't won yet

It would be a long argument, before the Chief was finally able to join the Larront team and continue onwards.

###

Archon " Orbit (Archon occupation, Day 4 " Midday)

Up in the _Spirit_'s hangar bay, the transmissions of gibberish had finally stopped coming. Well actually, they'd stopped about an hour and a half ago, but why be picky? Especially as something identifying itself as "Solis" had been pinging them instead. "Them", meaning the two harrier like craft. At this rate, it wouldn't be long before every single AI on the planet would have got in touch, offering advice as unhelpful as possible, or asking questions that the pilots were simply not authorised to answer.

That said, the transmissions were being targeted to blanket most of low orbit, this Solis obviously didn't know where the team was, only that they were there. Good, it meant that the tactic of clamping to the skin of a vessel to avoid detection had worked yet again.

but there was no excuse for the AI missing Sentinel and the rest of the Ward group " _those_ were still floating in plain view" at least, they had been two hours ago.

How many AI's were down there then? So far, two had revealed themselves, and Solis had been warning of some Tempest getting annoyed with the ground forces and their generally destructive approach to things. And then there was the Mercurial Wisdom that the ground teams had reported. That made four" or so it initially seemed.

Something in the transmissions from Solis seemed familiar. A presence, an aura embedded in the simple text messages that gave the impression that it was related to the rhyming lunatic. Not entirely incorrect, they were both Monitors of this planet sized installation, but it seemed" more than that.

..."_Metal Mythos_" the other pilot muttered.

"_What_"

"_A horrible operation we took part in six months ago. We never found a Monitor or the cause of the nightmarish goings on, but some parts of that facility seemed to have a similar feel. Maybe one of these Monitors is originally from there_."

"_I don't think that's quite the connection we were looking for. What did you mean by Metal Mythos anyway, I've never heard about it before_."

"_Ask someone else, I don't want to dig those nightmares out again. Try asking Ward 02's primary pilot, but broach it along the lines of "there's nothing worse than". He won't be able to resist proving you wrong, and any other way will get him clammed up. Honestly, you'll understand why we don't talk about it when you learn the details. If you're __**really**__ unlucky, he'll give you a visual file_."

â€|

"_If you're trying to scare me, don't bother. You've awoken my curiosity now, and we all know what that means._"

"_Curiosity killed the cat_."

"_So? I'm __**not**__ a cat_!"

"_You know, we've never been able to prove that. In mind at least_."

"_Ha ha, very funny. On a new topic, any word from our contact below? Ward team were supposed to be giving them a lecture on discrimination. Their conduct was bang out in that last engagement_."

"_You said it. And no, neither of __**them**__ have responded. R2A and R2B must be lying low. With the others down there, can't say I blame them_."

Silence fell, as the two of them considered the truth in that statement. That's the sort of thing that happened when you were saddled with teams of a dubious nature, and told to use them.

Still, could be worse. At least up here it was relatively safe. Down below on the other hand, well, who knew just how many ways there were for the ground teams to be given premature retirementâ€|

###

Had Serina been able to hear that previous conversation occurring way above their heads, she'd probably have dismissed it as being unworthy of her attention. Which wasn't the smartest thing to do, because anything the Forerunners set up should be closely investigated. As soon as possible, before it finds some way to generally wreck the universe. If she'd paid attention back in the vault, she'd have noticed Wisdom mentioning that there were other R-series Installations, and that they'd gradually dropped off the communications net. And why would that be? Surely they would have at least confirmed their continued operation to each other? Or were they up to their own experiments, experiments that had gone horribly wrong? Considering the remote location of Archon, it was a more likely possibility to the mundane "invaders out of nowhere" scenario.

The Larront team, now free of the need to move as part of a group, had made exceptional progress. Two hours after leaving the cave behind, they'd cleared the lake, trundled across a large floodplain, forded a riverâ€| and done a U turn when it transpired the refugee Sentinel had done the same. There had been no small amount of grumbling at that one, and even more when it turned out the Sentinel

had drifted up a scree slope and over a ridge, where the Warthog simply couldn't follow.

Things had been going so well too. At least, they had been for the last two hours, which was somewhat better than par for Archon. Even when the road had swerved off in a completely different direction, even when the vehicle had been forced to trundle up a shallow shingle bottomed watercourse to avoid the marsh on either side, even with the possibility of getting back before nightfall dwindling down to virtually zero (virtually, because everyone was aware of the Forerunner teleportation systems that showed up on all of their Installations), things had been far from unpleasant. And now, they'd been forced to leave the vehicle behind, and go mountaineering.

"I am so not built for this." huffed Smith, pulling himself up the latest stretch of cliff. He dragged himself away from the edge and then collapsed, panting, and looking up at the considerable climb left to them. Mira Larront, somehow still going strong despite being the one to drag the team's rocket launcher around, elbowed him on the way past and began scrambling up the next bit. A moment later, Tara Speek followed, the oriental woman barefoot.

"Oh come on," he moaned, watching Angela Larront reach level, and move to pass. But then she thought better and took a brief refresher break herself, only long enough to swig from her flask, but at least Smith was now reassured that others were finding the going difficult as well. With a groan, he got to his feet and resumed his climb.

Somewhere above, the Chief looked down from the apex of the ridge. He acknowledged that the marines weren't slowing him down as much as they could have, but it was painfully obvious to him that a solo journey would have been much faster in this situation. Yet even if he left the marines behind, without a vehicle he could never keep up with an airbourne Sentinel that never tired, unless events conspired to stall the thing. He doubted that was going to happen until it got wherever it was going.

Considering what lay just ahead, the marines were probably going to have a fit when they caught up with him. A short drop led into a patch of horizontal yet crumpled, rutted rock. That section didn't look particularly bad from up here, but the Chief knew that it would be appropriate to analogise it to a glacier "far worse up close. Beyond this, another steep climb some seventy metres up, this time with a brief ledge midway, but a mere resting stop before a demonic looking vertical ascent. If the Chief was balking at that one, then the marines certainly would. Serina's latest HUD waypoint sat right on top, tauntingly unreachable to all but the most determined.

"What I wouldn't give for a lift right about now..." drifted up from below, followed closely by an "Elevator, Smith?". Mira was apparently trying to wean the British private from his own version of English, but the bait wasn't being taken. And the distraction meant that it was Tara who hauled herself over the cliff edge first. She looked at the challenges still to go, wiped some of her short black hair away from her eyes, grunted, and set off again. The Chief watched after her in surprise and more than a little respect, but held back from continuing himself. At this point, he hadn't quite reached the point where he would just leave comrades behind. The Captain had entrusted these soldiers to his care, and he wouldn't deliberately let him

down. Not when there was no foreseeable advantage from doing so at least.

Angela was the next to appear, followed shortly by Mira and eventually Smith. By this point, Tara had reached the next cliff, and had finally stopped to let the others catch up. So, the SPARTAN and the other three marines set off after her. Thanks to Serina having been paying attention to Tara's choice of route, they made good progress across the crevassed and crumpled rock bed... and then were treated with the sight of the other marine's bare feet already on the next ascent. By this point, the Chief was starting to seriously consider the possibility that the wiry marine had mountain goat in her genes, absurd though the notion was.

"Geez, does she have iron in her soles?"

"Smith, don't be absurd. It's diamond. I wondered why every jewellers was sold out whenever we got leave."

Angela gave her sister a funny look at that one, but failed to use her rank to impose silence. The four of them began scrambling up the next slope in pursuit, with all but the Chief soon audibly wheezing at the harsh forty degree gradient. And it was going to get a lot worse past the midpoint.

"Actually Smith," Serina announced on the Tara subject, taking advantage of the fact that she wasn't worn out from climbing, "certain of the eastern Earth nations believe it healthy to regularly walk over cobbles without protection. I'm not sure if the other benefits make it worth it, but it does result in a very tough sole. Climbing in boots is probably far more awkward than dangling them around the neck like that."

Out of breath again, Smith failed to respond, and it wouldn't have surprised the Chief if the marine had completely failed to take it in as well. Not that he had much of a chance to answer, because a moment later Tara called down from above.

"Corporal, you might want to see this!"

As one, the group picked up the pace... yes, even Smith.

...

Only, the oriental private hadn't really found much of interest. Just a small cave mouth... emitting wisps of smoke and strange sounds.

"Not another opportunity to sidetrack!" moaned Serina, seeing the hoped for mission conclusion time hopping even further away.

The Chief moved up and activated his MJOLNIR's flashlight, looking into the gloom. It didn't look very promising, the narrow, natural looking cave turned a corner a short way in and vanished from sight. He was tempted to leave it behind, but a glance upwards at the sheer cliff face didn't really inspire the will to continue immediately. Besides, a short distance in couldn't hurt, and it would confirm (or disprove) that nothing nasty was going to jump out and Sentinel beam them in the rear.

"I could be mistaken," Serina mused, "but it seems that your AI's Sentinel met another here. One either entered or left this cave, and I'm not sure which... and I'm not sure I should have said that!" This last was to the action of the Chief taking a step in. She'd just given him another reason to delay the cliff climb, and if it so transpired that Cortana had entered here, then all the better!

One by one the marines followed, Smith deviously taking the rearguard position, where he was safe from anything but a sneaky Thorn... actually, maybe it wasn't the safest place to be after all, but his attempts to swap with Mira were profoundly ineffective.

At the corner, the Chief poked his head round and stared at what was quite clearly a dead end. The cave narrowed down to a mere crack, and even that showed no indication of going more than another metre on.

"Wasting time, our speciality." Mira commented, turning to leave. The Chief didn't, for there was one question still not answered. Where was that smoke coming from? He took a step forward... and found out, as the floor gave way underneath him! He caught a brief glimpse of rusted, grey metal plating, before he hit a more substantial shiny metal slope and began sliding down it.

"Okay, that was a mistake!" Serina shouted in his ear, as the slope abruptly went vertical, and dropped him down a short stone shaft and onto a pile of rubble. A moment later, the stars faded from his vision, revealing the vista of a long, dimly lit tunnel, and the twelve large shapes parked far too close. By some horrible quirk of fate, he'd just been dumped right next to the party of surprised mystery mechs and vehicles. A number of small, four legged spider like machines jumped up from where they'd been welding field repairs on mech armour plating, and collectively stared at him. Even without the benefit of the flashlight, the small cylinders snapping from their bodies were clearly weapons.

No one... or thing, moved. The Chief was aware that this was one fight he had no chance of winning, even with the mechs now sporting rather patchy looking armour. Plasma railguns alone were enough to ensure he kept very still. Now, if only the marines were smart enough to not follow him down...

Some hope. A scuffle from above signalled the arrival of Angela, closely followed by Mira. As they landed with somewhat more grace than the Chief had shown, they each discerned the situation, gripped weapons, and froze.

Tara was next to arrive, performing a painful looking landing. Feet as tough as old boots or not, dropping onto a pile of rubble was not a pleasant thing to do, especially if you somehow landed on all fours. Still, she managed to get up with nary a groan, so the true extent of her possible injuries remained unclear.

The humans looked at the machines, now in far too close proximity. The machines, or at least the spider things, looked back. No one could tell where the vehicles were looking, no one could even tell where the cockpits were— if there were any. The idea that they were purely AI controlled was still very much in the back of everyone's heads.

And there it stayed, because the next occurrence was rather low down on the anticipated response list. One of the spiders turned to face the shaft, and _spoke_, in a curiously melodious voice.

"Any more?" it saidâ€|

###

****Author's Notes****

And after the action packed last chapter, we're back to accumulating questions. It won't last, but if I did nothing but combat, this would start getting rather boring. Not that I haven't seen some very good stories that focus mostly on action (there's a couple in my favorite list for a start), but I don't think I _personally_ could keep it up without it getting stale. So, expect a good amount of combat from here on, but I'll continue developing the plot front as well.

If the little Warthog issue seemed a little out of the blue, I did give a couple of hints to Alchemist drawbacks earlier. Or rather, Cortana neatly dodged around the topic. I'm not in the habit of giving such a big advantage without strings attached, so a maximum range before its products go back to being gloop seemed a reasonable inhibiting factor on its usefulness.

I'll avoid saying anything else here â€" I need to cut back on the rambling. See you next time!

-Next Phase: Do We Stand United..?

8. Phase 8: Do we stand United?

****Halo: Genetics****

(A/N): What's this? An update in two weeks? Never saw that coming!

Disclaimer: Right, let's keep this one short and snappy. I _do not_ own the Halo universe, _343 Industries_ do. The Master Chief, Serina and Douglas are theirs, all other named characters in this chapter are mine. Anything Forerunner technology wise, bar the "Blade", is theirs but the so far undesignated outsiders (that the Chief bumped into at the end of the last chapter) are mine. The ground team call signs aren't though, they're from the Ace Combat series. Considering the intelligence of lawyers, that _should_ be clear enough, if one of them happens to browse this wayâ€|

****Phase 8: Do We Stand United..?****

Archon, Sector 16 â€" Melodious Cartographer facility (Archon Occupation â€" day 4, late afternoon)

A single red light, amidst a sea of stars. As a galaxy turns on, as cosmic matter streams past in ripples and waves, as planets dance and pirouette ever onwards, it remains fixated by a single point of light.

Tempest, was preoccupied.

Few knew just how complicated, how intricate the workings of the Melodious Cartographer were. Drawing real time information from countless probes, scattered the length and breadth of the galaxy, it assembles it all into a single, coherent picture. A 3D pseudo celestial show that never fails to leave anyone who sees it, speechless.

Unless you happen to be called Tempest. The Monitor, oblivious to the spectacle playing out all around it, was more interested in a tiny golden speck. The label was nothing special - "Balance", if you bothered to translate it from the incomprehensible Forerunner glyphs that set the label apart from most of the others in the titanic chamber.

Balance. _When will it be time..?_

â€|

The Monitor waited, dipped its scarred face to listen, but received no answer. Time and time again, the result had been the same. No response to the silent plea, like was answered with like. To most, this would be a sign to instil depression, a sign that you were finally, truly alone in the universe. But perhapsâ€| silence was an answer in itselfâ€|

The red eye dimmed, as the AI fell into a strange, mechanical trance. A host of voices assaulted it, some from within, some from without, all clamouring for attention, for a chance to be heard. To be frank, Tempest was tired of it all, was desperate to find a way to make it all end. If it wasn't for its duty to its long gone masters, it would have taken the easy way out long ago, would have taken itself to the nearest power conduit and purged those griping parts of its interior workings with pure plasma. Such a simple, elegant way to solve the problem, but such an action could quite possibly leave Archon without a leader. Something that _really_ couldn't be allowed to happen.

Archon was the last bastion of the Forerunners still fighting away, a lone light against the encroaching shadows. As other Installations went dark, destroyed or _worse_, Archon refused to go down. Even with this overseer infighting, even with raiders storming across the planet's surface, even with half of its facilities _missing_, it fought on. Fate was an enemy to be denied at every opportunity.

It was a pity that others believed the same. Solis and Nocturne were two examples that came to mind, but this "Demon", this "Master Chief", was tenacious in the extreme. 343 Guilty Spark, mentally unbalanced as it had been, had tried to take the SPARTAN out two occasions, the Covenant had thrown more troops at him than there were Flood specimens in the vaults. Speaking of the Flood, _they'd_ thrown enough bodies at the man to populate a good sized planetary sector and then some. And he'd _still_ managed to blow up the Ark! This was not an enemy to underestimate!

And so, the reason for this little trip to the Cartographer, even as the humans began to try the AI's patience once again. Buried amongst this display of distractions, was a small glimmer of hope. Ultimately, Tempest could bring its plans to their intended conclusion without the assistance that this lone light may give, but with it, success was all but assured. The only question was, would it

pay off? Or would Archon have to go it truly alone?

In the end, it didn't matter. Tempest had had many, long millennia, to learn that a reliance on others was a sure way to bring a complacent Monitor to its doom. And that, could never happen, not while Archon was the last custodian of the Forerunners true legacy. Thus, despite their infighting, Tempest and the others would do whatever it took to ensure Installation R03's survival. For while Archon survived, the Forerunners would never truly be gone. While their legacy survived, they survived...

...

And abruptly, Tempest was overcome by shocks from within.

"Not ****now****!"

Using all of its formidable will power, Tempest forced the symptoms of its... condition... back. It would only be temporary, these attacks on it were a frequent occurrence, and both Solis and Nocturne's minions were impossible to deter for long...

Limited time brought a certain urgency to the Monitor's actions. It quickly reviewed the agendas still to be resolved, sent the appropriate alert orders to the Foundry and Bastion facilities, checked to see if the search teams had located the Sanctuary of Solace yet (short answer: no), and checked all reports from the Sector 16 intelligence teams. The reports did not look good.

Humans were closing on the Bastion of Evolution, with one of their SPARTANs in tow. Aware that it was probably a futile gesture, but reminding itself that in this case, futile gestures led to progress, Tempest authorised the security subroutine to make use of a certain... asset.

The scouting Constructors had confirmed the worst â€" the other batch of outsiders had indeed stumbled into the old supply tunnel linking the Pryda lake road with the Foundry. Unable to send more defenders, the Monitor simply activated the bulk of the stationary defences and assigned a permanent watch on the tunnel exit. Although, why had the number of Sentinels and Enforcers showing up on the area scanners dropped? Had Solis quietly moved them out?

Before Tempest could follow the normal investigation routines, the latest attack from one of the other overseers slammed through its defences, and forced the AI to cease all activity. And as Tempest resigned itself to another period of unconsciousness, the red eye dimmed and the Monitor floated, otherwise dead to the world.

But one thing was for certain; it wouldn't be for long...

###

Archon, Sector 16 â€" Supply Tunnel F4 (Defunct)

A combat fatigue clad human thudded to the rubble, before rolling onto asphalt and coughing. The usual accompanying shower of dust and stones ceased a moment later, leaving the tunnel once again silent.

Low level lights embedded in the ceiling barely illuminated the scene. Five humans, in varying states of readiness, faced a group of dark silhouettes. Bright blue lights stared back, the three tiny spider like machines watching the humans with what they hoped was curiosity. After all, the only encounters the humans had so far had with the other group of outsiders, was during fire fights against Sentinels. None of them truly knew where the machines stood on the friend or foe scale, and they were more than a little wary of conclusively finding out. As such, weapons were held ready, if not actually aimed at their opposition. But no one moved.

For their part, the spiders were content to watch. The blue glows thrown out by each one wandered across the marines and lone SPARTAN, illuminating a head here, an arm there, occasionally lingering on some inconsequential feature. When the marines attempted to do the same, activating flashlights and playing them across the mechs, the support vehicles behind responded with spotlight strength illuminations. The message got across "an eye for an eye, you don't blind us, we won't blind you. So the marines turned their flashlights back down to the barest hint of a glow, and went back to squinting.

The Chief had better luck. Apart from his superior night vision, Serina had overlaid a sort of 3D sonar return over his HUD, revealing the machines in the form of blocky, angular arrangements of pale cubes. If they'd noticed her unorthodox use of the MJOLNIR speakers to broadcast sonar pings, they hadn't noticeably reacted.

One of the spiders turned, scuttled over to the nearest mech, and climbed up a leg. Clinging near to a forward section that the Chief was inclined to label the "head", it spoke quietly to the larger machine. It had probably intended its smooth, slightly sterile voice to remain unheard, but enhanced SPARTAN hearing and all thatâ€¦

"_See? I told you there'd be at least four of them! SPARTAN aside, they always travel in packs!_"

It paused, looked forward again, and sprang sideways. Like a certain feline species, it somehow twisted in mid-air to land squarely on all four feet, before slowly scuttling towards the humans. Not surprisingly, they drew backwards slightly, all but the Chief, who had been ordered to hold his ground. Serina was curious.

The spider halted, taking care to keep just out of boot range. At such a close range, the Chief could clearly make out its shape, even in the gloom. At a little under twenty centimetres across, the flattened dome supported by four spindly legs didn't look like much of a threat, even with the three longish stalk mounted barrels affixed to the top. The tiny pincers visible, retracted along with the now dormant miniature wielding iron, they made no difference in that respect. But after nearly being holed by an impossibly small equivalent to the MAC cannon that somehow added plasma to the mix, the Chief wasn't willing to take any chances. All he could do was go with the flow, and hope there wasn't a waterfall waiting downstream for him to plunge off.

And of course, this tiny droid had spoken. As it soon did so again.

"_So, joint force?_"

"Hold on, hold on, hold on!" Serina spoke privately into the Chief's ear. "Is it suggesting an _alliance_? Already?"

This was unexpected. And the spider's own allies seemed just as taken off guard, as a similar voice blared from one of the support vehicles.

"_Razgriz 2A, what are you doing? This does not match with our mission or orders!_"

"_Mutual assistance!_" the spider shot back. "_Or mutual shields if you will!_"

"It's pinging us." Serina announced, placing a text message into the Chief's vision. _Don't ask, I'm going out on a limb here. They'll think you're supposed to distract fire from us_. _You may want to detach your friends at first convenience_.

The Chief was _not_ happy with that, but the spider continued out loud, addressing everyone this time.

"_Right, I've no idea what reason you have for being here, but one way or another you'll be accompanying us out. We were forced to seal the tunnel behind us to keep the Enforcers out, therefore the only way out for either of us is out the other end. We support each other until we exit, at which point you may go your separate ways. Any objections or questions?_"

"Just one." announced Angela after a second, looking back up the shaft they'd arrived down. "What's stopping _us_ from leaving the same way we came in?"

There was a sudden loud noise, as a small missile arced out of the dark, reoriented upwards, and shot up the shaft. The muffled thud of a detonation was quickly replaced by the sound of falling rocks, and a cloud of dust billowing downwards.

"Bleeping Hall!" "swore" Smith, as the humans all raced away from the falling debris. When the dust finally settled, the shaft had quite simply, ceased to exist.

"_Just a little incentive_." another one of the machines, unseen in the dark, announced dispassionately.

"Well, there goes the thought that they could be allies." spoke Serina in a conversational manner. Somehow the nearest spider, scuttling alongside, heard.

"_No, consider it an opportunity to mutually learn of one another_." it said, before scurrying out of sight, leaving the Chief alone. With a muffled curse, the Chief realised that in his mad dash from the rock fall, he'd ended up separated from the rest of his team. A glance however, confirmed that they were all (for now) still unharmed. Shooting glares at the machines, he moved towards them for a little strategy meetingâ€¦

###

_Archon, Sector 16 " Subterranean complex, North of Pryda lake
(Archon Occupation, day 4 " Late Afternoon)_

#####Subterranean Subterfuge#####

Deep into the cave network they'd foolishly decided to explore, three marines and a SPARTAN were advancing cautiously along a suspiciously regular passageway. Flashlights reflected off smooth white stone, and the rushing water on the right. Nearly half of the oval shaped tunnel was taken up by an arrow straight canal, foamy water laced with some form of pollutants washing past at high speed. No one was particularly interested in finding out just what was in there first hand, so the humans advanced slowly but carefully. The idea of becoming associates of acids, or experiencing effluents just wasn't as appealing as it was in the olden days. Whenever that was " a lot of history counted as "the olden days".

If the group had had their way, they wouldn't have even been trying this passage anyway. Tempest though, had seen fit to literally block the main road with metal Sentinel bodies, so the small "overlooked" sewage outlet approach was paying dividends again. Humans and their snooping. The general line of thought, vocalised perfectly by Carther was: "Eh, war? So what, we need a scoop!"

Douglas, leading the pack with MA5 ready, raised a hand. Almost without thinking, the marines halted, with Lenkin turning to train an M90 shotgun in the rough direction of their rear. Easy enough to do, with a shotgun's spread it would take some incompetent idiot to miss something creeping up behind. And contrary to popular belief, marines were not incompetent. Nine times out of ten anyway, but every army has its Private Jenkins or two" |

As Carther and Heather crouched side by side and aimed assault rifles forward, Douglas crouched too, and moved silently forwards. He readied his Point Defence Gauntlet, aware of the irony of the situation. Not that long ago, he'd been shooting Jackals hiding behind the things, now, he was the one taking cover behind the surprisingly useful bit of kit. As he advanced, he shut down his flashlight and allowed his eyes to adjust to the sudden lack of stimuli. Good, now he could see more than the contents of a fairly small circle.

Underneath his feet, the stone gave way to asphalt, and a shape to the right materialised into a wide, heavy duty span of bridge crossing the waste channel. He looked around, listening, but only silence assailed his ears. Not that silence can't be pretty deafening at times" |

Details in the gloom, a snaking road edging around cavern walls. Just on the other side of the road, a calm but dirty subterranean lake stretched into the dark, true extent a complete unknown. It could have been a mere 50 metres across, it could have been a couple of miles. Guessing that heading right would bring the team to the wrong side of that Sentinel blockade, and that they'd be more than a little annoyed at being bypassed by such a simple trick, Douglas indicated a preference to go left. Or, not a preference, because technically he outranked the marines, as much as Carther disliked the notion. Regardless, they were going left.

This time, Carther took point, the stocky marine proving surprisingly fast as they rounded one bend and then one more. Then he stopped, and switched his own flashlight off, indicating with finger to lips that everyone should keep quiet. They did, but it didn't stop Lenkin and Heather from pushing past the statue of a SPARTAN and squinting past their comrade. Off in the distance, a formation of lights were visible, embedded into a large, sloping wall extending from the wall of the cavern and out into the lake. Between them and it, the road veered into the cavern wall itself, through what looked like a long sequence of semi sculpted caves and galleries, piled in places with storage containers and illuminated by functional ceiling mounted lights. And a barely audible whine indicated that there were Sentinels on the prowl.

###

Outside, watching the shadows of evening growing ever outwards from the mountain edge, Samantha Gordez was silent. Next to her, lay the partially deconstructed shell of a Myna mk. II aerial relay drone, that Carther had so kindly left behind. She'd quickly attempted to get it operational so she could call Alpha base and get evac, but then she'd discovered why Lenkin had looked somewhat jumpy about the whole affair (before Carther had rudely yanked the other corporal away by means of an ear and the grip of a vice). Someone had failed to mention the crudely soldered control wire, with the ultimate result of a good tirade directed at the other two officers. Next time she looked up, Drane and the other marine had somehow moved thirty metres further away. Each feigned ignorance, but Samantha knew a lie when she saw one. Heard one even.

So, once she'd finally managed to reconnect the two wayward bits of control wire, without the benefit of any real binding agent, she'd managed to get the drone airborne. That would have been enough, but then she discovered that the Myna was "send only", and she had no way of knowing whether the message had actually gotten through. Tinkering with the interior had turned the still quite serviceable drone into a sorry looking collection of spare parts held together by tangled wire.

Curiously, after she'd done that, her companions were a good hundred metres away and asleep, sprawled next to the water's edge. Maybe they could sleepwalk with injuries; it was as good an explanation as any on this world if you happened to ignore the obvious one clamouring for attention and yet being ignored.

Scowling and doing her foul language with her eyes for once, she began pacing across the bridge and aiming to join her comrades. The Myna remained where it was, sprawled on the decking for a moment anyway. Then a high pitched buzz drew her attention back, to see the drone "cord, control box and all" happily levitating itself off the ground.

"What the fu"

Then, a little bit of observation, with a side helping of logic, guided her eyes to the drone's rotors. They weren't moving, meaning that this was either the result of a magic trick, or

Another set of Constructors darted out from under the bridge, and joined their single struggling friend in lifting the weighty device.

Samantha swore (again!) and began running. A truly awe inspiring leap gave the result of a complete miss, as the Constructor pack surged upwards and out of reach. As Samantha somehow turned her dive into a fluid roll, she looked up to see the Forerunner drones and their prize veer into the cave and disappear.

"Bastard! More crappy paperwork!"

"Paperwork?" Drane's voice seemed to mutter at the lower limits of her hearing. "Isn't that the least of her worries?"

She whirled, noted the marine hadn't moved, and promptly yelled for them to "Stop faking it!"

Out in the bay, a ripple on the water. Samantha didn't notice, on account of her helmet radio finally kicking into life.

"_Whiskey three ninety-nine to Corporal Gordez, do you copy_?"

"We copy. You inbound? What took you so fucking long?"

"_Hey, you want a ride or not? We had to check the Vultures were ready, unless you want your rescue to need rescuing._"

"_Vultures_?" That sounded bad, for very specific reasons, as the Pelican and pair of bulky aerial gunships hove into view. "Didn't you get the message about the situation?"

"_We heard you needed evac for a couple of wounded. The rest was lost in the interference, you need your Myna looked at._"

Oh, it's being looked at all right, thought Samantha, aware that even now the Constructors were probably dismantling the worthless thing. But Vultures? No Vultures had made it off the Spirit, which meant-

"_Get those Vultures to stop!_" she screamed into the mike, watching in horror as the three aircraft began to loom in her vision. But it was too late. Even as the air support gunships nose upped and attempted to kill their forward momentum, they crossed the indistinct line that marked the outer edge of the Alchemist's influence. Vultures, are larger than Warthogs. Quite a bit larger. But that extra mass simply meant more silvery mimic gloop about to form, plunge and hit the water, with catastrophic results.

Imagine, if you will, a drop of mercury. It's not entirely liquid, it has a rather high viscosity. It also freezes at about minus forty degrees centigrade, becoming a true solid. Now, imagine if the mercury actually froze at twelve degrees, about the temperature of Pryda lake. Imagine the mercury hitting the lake, instantly freezing into a solid drop of metal, and sinking fast. This, was roughly what happened with the mimic gloop that the former Vultures had become.

As the Pelican came to its own halt, it was clear that there were going to be no survivors. The Vultures and their crews were locked together in two conglomerate masses, sinking like stones. Moments later, they were gone from view, gone for good.

But this wasn't the end of the problems. Arctic Claw suddenly swerved

to the left, dodging what looked like an explosion of spray from below. A pair of slimy, impossibly long tentacles whipped up, flailing at the darting aircraft and only just missing. Something down there was angry. And considering it had just been hit by a pair of unwanted metal weights, you could see why. It swiped at the Pelican again, but Maloski had by now managed to gain enough altitude to be relatively safe. The same couldn't be said about the ground pounders, for obvious reasons.

A section of the lake's formerly placid surface bulged upwards, pushed apart by an emerging eye. A huge, monstrous eye, to match the no doubt huge, monstrous creature below. As a curved, vaguely parrot like beak surfaced alongside, the eye looked around with furious stare. And settled.

"Move it you two!" shouted Samantha, gesturing wildly at the unlucky marines who had caught the creature's attention. The eye went under, but a mere couple of seconds later the water next to Drane boiled and parted, the colossal tentacle coming down hard. Before she could comprehend the suddenness of the attack, the eye was back, this time looking at her.

"Shit!"

That word didn't even begin to cover the level of fear going through the marine's mind, as she began running at full pelt along the bridge. She didn't even have a destination, merely a motive, but a motive was enough. Reaching the junction, instinct turned her to the right, along the road leading to the cave's interior. Possibly, just possibly, the water would be shallow enough in there to prevent the leviathan from launching another attack.

A sudden shadow, a wet thud just behind, accompanied by a sudden sensation of wind. No look backwards required, she could sense the tentacle being pulled back into the water, the creature preparing for another attempt. To be truthful, Samantha was under no illusions that this time, the creature would miss. She was already tiring, adrenaline and fear being overcome by fatigue, slowing her down. Another swipe, and she'd go the same way as Drane and the other marine.

It was a good thing then, that Maloski chose that moment to take a risk. Diving her Pelican lakewards, she lined the bird up for her co-pilot to take a shot. Which he did, the heavy staccato of the chin machine gun joined by the roar of an entire pack of ANVIL II missiles, all targeted at the creature's eye. That distracted it all right! Flailing wildly, it sunk beneath the surface, leaving the water rapidly turning red and nightmare memories in its wake.

And as Whiskey three-ninety nine swooped in for an express pickup, it seemed that finally, Archon was proving too much for the human spirit...

###

Archon, Sector 16 " Supply Tunnel F4 (Archon Occupation, day 4 " Evening)

Certain creatures have a knack of getting anywhere. Ants and spiders show up on every world you happen to visit, which is nothing compared

to the feral pigeon which somehow shows up in every _town_. You could almost consider the latter a practical joke on the behalf of the Forerunners, a simple matter of seeding the bird's ancestors onto every possible world. But truth be told, they'd had nothing to do with it. The grey, almost spheroid birds dancing around Forerunner feet were present even as the first Forerunner to invent the circular wheel was basking in the awe of his audience. Somehow, they'd never really changed much since then. Well, okay, they did, but evolution always brought the things back to their easily recognised pest form in due time.

Of course, expecting them to inhabit a gloomy, disused supply tunnel was a stretch too far. So, it was the colony of subterranean spiders that were witness to the "promised light" steadily moving up the passageway towards them. Even spiders can develop religion, even if their iteration of it makes no logical sense to us more "advanced" life forms.. Admittedly, the insects wouldn't know what religion was if a good hundred lightning bolts scorched the tarmac around them. An interesting paradox, don't you think? A creature that has religion, yet has no idea what it is?

Okay, so that might have been pushing the realms of credibility, but on Archon, one could never be sure. Anyway, the spiders weren't around for much longer. Those that weren't smart enough to scurry for cover within the cracked wall, or up to the cobwebbed ceiling, were soon crushing by descending mech foot.

The combined human and mechanical forces moved up the tunnel, humans keeping in a loose group as far from the machines as they could. Even if that meant more clothing wear and tear against the wall. By mutual consent, the Chief was closest to the unwanted companions, something that didn't really appeal to him but made sense. _He_ had shields. Still, as he walked alongside one of the plodding mechs, he was at least privy to a little back and forth conversation between Serina and thatâ€¦| _Razgriz_.

After the destruction of their ingress, the humans had reluctantly come to the conclusion that, yes, they did need to cooperate with their new associates. After the spider droids had finished cannibalising the tunnel's metal supports into patchy replacement mech armour, the group had set off. The spiders had each disappeared inside the bowels of the various war machines, revealing themselves to merely be the pilots. Machines piloting machines, that made senseâ€¦| not. With each vehicle illuminating the tunnel ahead to a far unnecessary degree, the convoy had set off.

Audibly, there was no sign but for the regular mechanical stomping of mech feet, the accompanying whine of actuators, and the low rumble of tires. The marines weren't in the mood for talking, and neither were the majority of the other party. Apart from one. The worryingly friendly pilot was busy exchanging a series of text messages with Serina, who was piping the entire lot onto his HUD. It was starting to tire the Chief's eyes out from all the reading, but he _had_ at least learnt a little.

According to Razgriz 2A, this was the extent of their local forces on the planet. They'd arrived only recently, part of what was referred to as an enhanced "Solar Wind Surveillance" team, and were investigating the world forâ€¦| something. Trying to get more information on their origins, who they were working for, what this

something actually was, all attempts led to a simple change of topic by the droid pilot.

There were, all counted, eight of the four legged mechs stomping in formation with each other. Each one bristled with weaponry, from the obvious multiple machine guns and top mounted missile bank, to the less obvious; the plasma railgun systems â€" currently concealed within. Apparently, these were referred to as "C. IV's", the C being short for something but another thing that Razgriz 2A refused to spill the beans on. This might have been due to the insane giggling fit and the words "_Oh, the __**irony**__!_".

Just behind, the support vehicles. They weren't so noticeably armed; a pair of rotary machine guns complemented a single heavier turret of unknown function. Each one rolled along on six wheels, a smooth flowing shape topped by varying antenna and miniature radar. They were referred to as "Servicers", and as their name suggested, they were there to keep the little task force operational for longer. Supposedly, they were mission control and supply units rolled into one. Razgriz 2A even hinted at internal ammo manufacturing capabilities.

So, four of the Servicers and twelve of the C. IV's. They were then divided into four equal teams: Razgriz, Espada, Rigel and Pixy. As for pilots, well apparently each of the machines held three of the spider things. They must have been sharing duties amongst themselves.

To be honest, even Razgriz 2A wasn't being very helpful. Eventually, Serina stopped trying to find new ways to slip past the "not authorised to answer that" barrier, and lapsed into a period of blissful inactivity. Blissful, because the Chief was no longer the unwilling recipient of constant paraphrasing. She had left _something_ in the corner of his vision though â€" a satellite view of the area taken from the _Spirit of Fire_, before Mercurial Wisdom had somehow shut down the power, the Chief's estimated location pinpointed with a glowing cross. From that and the sheer length of this apparently never-ending tunnel, the Chief was starting to seriously consider that they might end up walking to the far end of the mountain _range_, before the tunnel finally played along and hit the surface.

A lack of natural light ahead seemed only to confirm his fears. The tunnel stretched onwards, barely even a barred air shaft to break the monotony. No Sentinels, no Flood, no Thornsâ€¦ just more cowering spiders to watch the procession march past. Still, things could beâ€¦ no, he wasn't going to finish that sentence. Tempting fate on Archon was a sure way for it to seriously consider making your life just that much more of a misery.

Eventually, the tunnel came to an momentary pause, opening out into a largish cavern. Ventilation shafts above were deathly quiet, flashlights playing across them revealed a distinctive _lack_ of motion from the giant fan blades hidden behind the rusty metal grilles. Somehow though, there was a slight breeze wafting about, moving stale air around just enough to keep the air breathable. Dripping water plipped and plopped from the walls, collecting in reasonably large pools before seeping through myriad micro-fissures and disappearing from sight.

"Cosyâ€|" muttered Angela, the only member of the human team to speak up. Her flashlight wandered across a number of stalagmites sprouting from the rusty metal floor. Serina yawned in the back of the Chief's mind. He, meanwhile, didn't know quite when this tunnel had been closed down; but it must have been centuries ago for those complicated arrangements of stalagmites and stalactites to reach the scale that they had. The humans made to move for the other side of the chamber, where a continuation of the tunnel beckoned. Except then the C. IV's moved to the side, straight towards a heap of rusty scrap metal. Razgriz 2A pinged a message informing the group that a rest break was "mandatory" (_Can't have you wearing yourselves out, can we?), in a manner where the implicit threat was almost too great to be concealed in such benign words. Moaning, the humans made for the opposite side of the chamber, getting as much distance from the blocky mechs as they could. The marines found various jagged rock outcroppings and _attempted_ to settle down comfortably.

For his part, the Chief leant against the cavern wall a short distance further around, back to a rocky pillar â€" a position allowing a good view of their "friends". He leant in what he hoped was a nonchalant manner, left gauntlet idly fingering the SPARTAN laser still attached to his back. Across the way, some of the spider pilots had dismounted and were poking their way through the scrap pile. The way they were dismantling it, it would soon be a scrap _mess_, rubbish scattered all over the place. He only supposed they were seeing if there was anything worth salvagingâ€|

"_Intriguing, aren't they?_" a voice spoke from the dark. The Chief twisted to see a blue eye staring at him from the depths of a crevasse. He didn't bother reacting, this one wasn't a threat. He went back to watching the gradually dispersing pile.

"_I should warn you, trusting them might be a poor decision. Call that some friendly advice._"

"We don't trust them." The Chief quietly responded, silently thinking that Solis hadn't quite proved itself yet either. "We haven't got a choice in the matter."

"_Choices? Choices are everywhere, as numerous as the autumn leaves. I chose to oppose Tempest, you chose to destroy Halo Installation 04, your friends chose to come here rather than continue on their course to Earth. And what about __**them**__? What did they choose? And what choices have they yet to make?_"

It was pretty clear what Solis was referring to by _them_. He glanced back again, briefly meeting the eye of the otherwise hidden Monitor, and just as quickly looking away. He wasn't sure why, but that gaze just unnerved him.

"â€|You know, you're almost sounding like Nocturne there."

â€|

The Monitor didn't answer. When the Chief looked back a third time, the eye was gone.

###

_Archon, Sector 16 â€" Subterranean Complex, north of Pryda lake

(Archon Occupation, Day 4 " Evening)_

The calm of the caves came to an abrupt end as Douglas swung round a corner, to find a Sentinel right in his face. Reflexes took over and sent the SPARTAN into a dive, even as the startled machine discharged its orange beam straight over his head. In one smooth motion, he brought out his MA5 to bear, and squeezed the trigger. Agreement be damned, that thing had fired first! The salvo of bullets tore into the machine, severing exposed wires, opening holes in its metal skin and pouring inside. Ten bullets later, and a sequence of internal explosions took the Sentinel from the inside.

Three marines charged round the corner, settling into a roughly triangular formation with the SPARTAN at the centre. The need for secrecy past, each soldier turned his or her flashlight to full brightness, illuminating the gentling curving gallery and sending the previously unseen bat colony above their heads into hysterics. Another Sentinel cruised out of a side passage, turned to fire, but was instantly felled by a shower of pellets spewed from Lenkin's shotgun.

"Hell!"

"Save it for later, Carther!"

More Sentinels appeared from behind, put paid to with multiple shotgun blasts but not before their beams got dangerously close. A group of Enforcers, six strong, surged into view behind them, activated shields and began charging weapons.

It was a confined space. With no chance of using his superior mobility to combat the machines, there was only one possible way to defy the odds. Douglas took an executive decision, and grabbed his custom rocket launcher. Lenkin seemed to grasp his intention, tried to grab the SPARTAN, but too late; Douglas launched all four rockets at once, straight for a cracked portion of ceiling, scattering the tiny bats in all directions. Unbeknownst to him, he was continuing a trend " this was the third time today that someone had intentionally caused a cave in. When the dust finally settled, the humans were left staring at a collapsed tunnel that used to be their only way out.

Douglas was suddenly the target of the nastiest looks imaginable. And a little bafflement at the SPARTAN's actions, slowly replaced by acceptance as logic kicked in. Lenkin was the first to voice his opinion.

"Seriously? Was that really the only way?" Douglas nodded.

"Well, I guess I'll take your word for it. Just one issue..."

"..._How the Hell are we going to get out_?" Carther finished for him. "I acknowledge that those Enforcers would have been the end of us, but surviving them means squat if we can't get out of here!"

Douglas looked blankly on... or maybe that was just the impression of the mirrored helmet faceplate. Then, he noticeably straightened, the metaphorical light bulb gleaming above his head.

"We go deeper." he announced. Partially confused looks radiated from the two corporals, but Heather looked a little more understanding.

"Let me guess," she said, glancing down the gallery. "We look for an alternative exit, do some recon while we're at it, and if all else fails we hole up somewhere and wait for this blockage to be cleared."

Douglas nodded. Grumbling, Carther and Lenkin indicated involuntary "do we really have a choice here?" assent. Just in time, because a pair of Sentinel Majors turned the corner in front and began charging weapons.

"Down!" ordered Douglas, priming a fragmentation grenade and lobbing it. The marines threw themselves to the ground, Douglas stepping in front and activating his Point Defence Gauntlet. Before the Major's could unleash their beams of blue death, the grenade went off, blowing a hole in the floor and sending a shower of metal fragments hammering into their underbellies. A few stones too, and the extreme proximity of the blast was a crucial factor in ending the exchange prematurely.

Douglas, despite the technically inferior PDG (when compared to Sentinel shielding) came off better. Ask any marine their opinion on the best way to deal with a Jackal, and they'd tell you grenades. "Gets right past their cover, sah!" they'd say, and they would be right. But the shrapnel thrown up by a grenade, now that was a different kettle of fish entirely. It was true that Douglas felt the shockwave from the blast hit the shield and translate itself into objecting hands and arms, and it was also true that the strain of holding back the shrapnel pushed the generator to its limit. But the now nicely rosy shield held, and so the SPARTAN, not to mention the marines behind, came off distinctly best. Hearing the increasing whine of more Sentinels inbound, the team quickly reformed into a rough firing line, marines forward with shotguns and assault rifle, Douglas behind with rocket launcher reloaded and ready.

A Sentinel was first round the corner, closely followed by an overeager Enforcer. Leaving the Sentinel for the marines to handle (which they did, with ease), Douglas launched two rockets simultaneously. Shields or not, the only possible result from that was an Enforcer with a smouldering warhead embedded into its heart. Which promptly detonated.

As the various surviving pieces of the two machines crashed to the ground, silence fell like a blanket. The humans listened, senses coming up blank when it came to new hostiles. Surely the Sentinels hadn't given up? Wary of waiting and letting the Forerunner defences dictate the time of the next attack (and more precisely, gathering their forces into an unstoppable juggernaut), Douglas ordered a slow advance.

The marines split up, Lenkin and Carther pressing against the left hand wall, Heather joining Douglas by the right. In jumps and starts, they crouch walked their way onwards, round the corner and into

Okay, if Douglas had encountered this scene on a human or Jackal

world, he'd have thought of it as a smugglers hideout. The gallery emerged from the wall of the great cavern, the floor spreading out and joining a series of stone jetties jutting into the water. There were no boats visible, but a number of large (and a few small) storage crates lined the wall to the left. There were also a good number of crevasses and smaller galleries, possibly leading to deep storage if the heavy scraping marks along the visible walls were any indication. On the far side of the harbour, the large metal wall of a Forerunner compound gleamed in the flashlights, a huge metal door the only possible ingress. It was of course, closed and sealed.

Heather tapped the SPARTAN's shoulder, and indicated a shadowy object far out in the water, pressed up against the compound wall. At first, Douglas couldn't make out why she had drawn his attention to it. Then his eyes picked up on the darting blue glows, Constructors zipping around, through and behind something. Something large. The rocket launcher's handy scope told a bigger story.

The shadowy object, was in fact a giant cage, half submersed in the water. Within, the Constructors danced around a hulking shape, larger versions regularly diving underwater. They were up to something, but even with the scope, Douglas couldn't quite make out what. The distance and the gloom were just too restrictive. But he could make out what looked like tentacles, wrapped around the metal barsâ€¦

"Wow, that is gross!" Lenkin could be heard muttering. Carther responded something back, and Douglas turned to see the former with his hands inside one of the crates, the lid just ajar.

"Ahem! What have you boys found over there?" Heather whispered, in a very carrying voice. They jumped, Lenkin snatching his hands out and looking guilty. Or maybe it was sheepish, in this light, it was hard to tell. Of course, there were four active flashlights around, but Douglas wasn't willing to blind his companions in the process of finding out. Motioning Heather to stay where she was, he hurriedly crossed the space, all but shoved the lid off the crate, and shone his light inside.

"Ugh!"

Even a SPARTAN will have trouble keeping quiet when faced with a crate filled with organs. Not human organs, but still organs. The rather morbid contents were individually wrapped, sealed in vacuum tight bags and carefully stacked in neat little piles. It wasn't a pleasant sight, especially when Douglas moved a large liver like organ to one side, only to find a partially dissected Thorn head staring at him. At that point, he decided he'd had enough and put the lid back, shuddering.

The two corporals were playing their flashlights across the rest of the crates, looking rather unnerved. Carther motioned Heather over as Douglas began moving along the cavern wall, momentarily checking each crate as he passed. Each one, contained enough raw meat to give a platoon meat poisoning. As the marines slowly advanced to cover him, Douglas began to feel distinctly queasy.

They hopped a drainage channel, and approached the next batch of crates. All the while, the tension grew greater. What was all this for? What were those Constructors doing out there? What was that

buzzing? It couldn't be flies, not this deep underground, and there hadn't been any maggots visible in any of the crates.

And also, just where were the Sentinels? They knew roughly where the human intruders were, why hadn't they sent more machines to put the team down? Not for one moment did Douglas believe that they'd polished off the entire local security division, it just wasn't possible for such a weak setup.

"Carther, this really isn't the time for you to be staring at me!" Heather suddenly snapped at her superior. "And don't think you can pin it on Lenkin, he's in front of me!"

"I assure you, I don't need to blame anyone. I've been too busy trying to suss out that little activity out on the lake to try anything like that anyway."

"Really? So whose eyes did I just feel on my back?"

"Not mine. And if you didn't have a partially blocked right ear, you'd have worked out that I was to your right. I couldn't stare at your back from here if I wanted to!"

Douglas looked at Lenkin, who'd moved alongside by now. The other grinned and signalled "Domestics!". Well, actually he didn't, but it was clear what he meant. Everyone knew that the other two marines "had something going on". But Douglas turned to look anyway, just in time to spot Heather turning and realising Carther was telling the truth. And there was no way he could have moved over to the nearest jetty in a hurry without making some form of noise.

"Wait a moment. So if you are over there, then who's watching me?"

Labelling the feeling of being watched as paranoia, is rarely a smart thing to do. It's been proved time and time again that there is no such thing as the "sixth sense". Except, the sensation of being watched almost always shows up when you are being watched. The other marines realised this at about the same time that Douglas did, with the result being one very well illuminated section of wall, and one curiously dark crevasse. Signalling the marines to take cover, Douglas moved carefully towards it. Planting himself against the wall next to it, he grasped his rifle (favoured over the rocket launcher because he was not going to cause an explosion in the same confined space that his head was about to occupy), activated his golden Jackal shield, and swung round.

The flashlight revealed a lurking Sentinel on the crevasse floor. And another, sitting on top of it. And another sitting on top of that. In fact, the whole crevasse, as far back as the SPARTAN could see, was literally jam packed with the things! He jumped backwards and lobbed a plasma grenade, aware that a shrapnel explosion in there would only take out a couple of machines, and the rest would be after his blood. As he ducked behind the nearest crate and watched the sudden blue glow and a selection of Sentinel parts emerge behind him, the marines as one vaulted another crate and took cover in the narrow gap between it and the wall.

And then the surviving Sentinels appeared. They were angry, swarming out in a stream of mechanical bodies that seemed to have no endâ€¦|

until there were roughly forty or fifty of the things, all firing as one. They weren't too smart, aiming for the cover rather than trying to drift into a position where they could get a clear shot at the humans behind. Most of them were gunning for the SPARTAN, but the marines were pinned down as well. Suspecting that it was up to him to begin the thinning down process, Douglas poked his MA5 round the side, using his PDG shield as cover. A quick burst dealt with one Sentinel, but there were more, many more, and the SPARTAN's shield couldn't hold out forever against those concentrated beams. Five seconds, and it was down, the generator struggling feebly to recharge it. Cursing, Douglas pulled back.

Meanwhile, the marines were actually having more success. Alternating in a fairly random fashion, they proceeded to blind fire, keeping all but their hands and weapons behind cover and firing wildly into the mass of Sentinels. With that many targets, they couldn't help but hit something. Five Sentinels were down before someone chucked a grenade, completely missing the main pack of hostiles but successfully demolishing a quite threatening looking crate. The second was more accurate, blowing a hole right in the centre of the massed machines, and sending the rest tumbling away in all directions. It was too much to ask for them all to catastrophically collide with the ground however, and most of them managed to arrest their motion with little more than scratch damage from impacts with each other.

Still, it gave Douglas a chance to pop out and dispense some more misery to the opposition with a trio of well placed rockets. The number of Sentinels was dropping, but now Douglas was down to his last rocket, assuming there weren't any fresh rounds conveniently lying around. He switched back to the assault rifle, and sprayed half a magazine across the reeling survivors, dispensing two more. Great, only another twenty to go! Actually, that was pretty good, considering they'd started facing fifty odd. Calculating his odds, the SPARTAN figured that it was nearly safe enough for him to start fighting from the open.

Right on cue, Lenkin and Carther raised themselves above cover, just long enough to fire twin blasts of shotgun pellets. With the machines still so spread out from successive explosions, only another three went down, but it provided the distraction Douglas had been looking for. In an instant he had vaulted from cover, riddled the nearest pair of Sentinels with bullets, and stuck a third with his second and last plasma grenade. A sharp, risky kick sent the stricken machine into a reforming group of its comrades, sending the lot of them to the "great Forerunner scrapyard in the sky".

Just ten of the machines left now. Behind him, the marines simultaneously broke from cover, all using assault rifles to great effect. Douglas was almost impressed. But then, these were survivors of not one, not two, but three consecutive campaigns; they were veterans of the highest standard. Not quite to SPARTAN standards of course, but the Spirit of Fire survivors were to a man (or woman), equal to the most skilled of (non Spirit) ODST's.

Together with their aid, the SPARTAN mopped up the last few machines. The final moments of the engagement were hairy, Sentinel beams almost hitting the marines on several occasions, but ultimately the automatons were just too disorganised to offer much resistance. The last machine fell, victim of an internal power cell incident as its

shell was penetrated by more bullets than a Flood combat form would have warranted. And finally, the humans could rest...

But yet, it was not to be. A running battle right next to an enemy compound, isn't going to escape notice. Even the most inept guard or security subroutine was going to spot a ruckus of that scale, and enact some form of countermeasures. Maybe a barrage from defensive turrets, or the controlled detonation of the ceiling above the invaders. Maybe even, should the controlling defender feel old fashioned, a little bath of boiling water. Or a release of acid, if it happened to be under delusions that it was some sort of Bond villain.

Or perhaps, none of the above. In this case, the defending security subroutine chose the simple option, releasing another batch of Sentinels from the compound roof, a good number of Major's mixed in. And... something else.

A large blast door positioned halfway up the wall groaned open. Emerging from the glowing interior, something familiar only to the SPARTAN. A V wing, eyed cube suspended below it by a single slender stalk. It was another one of the mystery machines that Fire Lance 3 had dropped during the hectic aerial battle from yesterday. This one seemed a little different, slightly larger than the last and with a few added protuberances.

"BLADE II RELEASED. ALL UNITS, STERILISE."

Wearily the marines retreated behind cover as the latest wave of enemies approached. Except, the Sentinels halted, and let the new machine take the fore. Douglas almost grinned behind his visor, remembering how easily the last had fallen to Hawk autocannon. Then of course, he realised two slight issues. One, he didn't have a vehicle grade autocannon, let alone the two carried by Hawk's, and two, he knew that there was probably a reason why it was trying to take him on alone.

A moment later, he knew. A protuberance on top of the thing spat a very familiar looking green orb, a glowing ball of plasma. Before he could react, the orb homed in on his reactivated PDG shield, overloading the Kig Yar technology immediately. And just as immediately, the machine followed up with a pair of sizzling blue beams, starting to either side and sweeping inwards.

Freezing, was not a good thing to do here. Some might have, Douglas did not. Breaking right, he leapt over the beam coming at him from the opposite direction, and slid behind cover. Only then did he discover that he'd only just cleared it, testimony clear in the form of a charred line across the very bottom of his armoured boot. Any lower, and he'd have lost an ankle, or worse.

The marines unleashed their own little version of hell, targeting the mechanical with the concentrated effect of a whole three assault rifle magazines. No effect, beyond a pretty sparkling as the entire hundred and eighty rounds hit overshield strength defences. And now the machine's attention was drawn to them. As the deadly beams dove towards them, they wisely ducked and let the crate take the heat. And then quickly scattered for other, undamaged cover as it literally fell apart.

With the entire team scattered and facing a far superior foe, Douglas found fear beginning to set in. Try as he might, without the benefit of heavy weapons he just couldn't see how to get his team out of this mess...

###

Archon, Sector 16 â€" Supply tunnel F4 (defunct)

By Serina's estimates, it was midnight when the combined force finally emerged from the end of the impossibly long tunnel. It was hard to accept that, because someone had turned on an artificial sun in the valley ahead.

The tunnel had indeed gone under half a mountain range before it finally deigned to return to the open. Surfacing on the side of a mountain, the entrance disgorged its contents onto a small plateau overlooking a steep sided valley. Vegetation was nowhere to be seen, instead of trees the ground was characterised by numerous rocky spires, stabbing upwards as a field of needles. The road petered out immediately, the elements having done their work years ago, stripping the asphalt from the rocky slopes. That said, a rough trail was still visible, and it was this way that the marines started moving. Meanwhile, the Chief was going to stick with the other group for just a little longer, at least until they'd advanced forward to the plateau edge and seen what was below. He didn't particularly trust them, but he knew that they would be good distractions if the Forerunner remnants decided that this was a "restricted area". Once he'd ascertained the nature of the surroundings, he'd make tracks away from these shady denizens of the unknown as fast as possible.

He'd been careful to brief the marines, using a number of hand signals he'd directed them to follow the track until they were out of sight, then to climb into the maze of rocks above. Once he'd successively regrouped, they could decide what to do next. It was all too possible that this would involve a premature return to Alpha base, because unless something unexpected showed up, Cortana's trail would have dissipated beyond recovery. He would still find her. But the when and how had yet to be settled.

The other group slowed down, leaving the Chief to gradually gain a small lead. If he wasn't so sure that they preferred him to be beam fodder rather than target practice, he'd have been more careful at allowing them to be behind him. But for now, they had nothing to gain by shooting him, so he assumed their change of pace was just a cautionary measure. A SPARTAN on the other hand was less noticeable.

As the edge of the plateau became closer, the Chief became aware of plumes of smoke rising above him, soaring high into the pitch black sky. If it wasn't for the blinding influence of the lights below, the Milky Way would be visible above, but great lights are often vision impairing, despite what logic may have to say on the matter. He did a quick check on the satellite map still in the corner of the HUD. If he was right, the tunnel had dropped them right next to the supposed "industrial area" that Scout team Charlie had tried to reach two days ago. The subterranean journey had taken them to the north west, completely bypassing any Sentinel checkpoints in the narrow mountain passes. They'd unwittingly managed to creep straight underneath the

main security net.

The edge was very close now, and so the Chief went prone, crawling forwards. Serina raised the visor's light filter setting, and he poked his head over the brink of the cliff. The view, quite nearly took his breath away.

Directly below him, at the bottom of the cliff, was an enormous open air facility. It actually started high, the valley walls coated in metal up to a height of some six hundred metres. Numerous Sentinels sat ready on pads lining the many ledges, with passageways implying that there was a _lot_ more to this place than the merely visible.

And just _that_ was considerable. As the Chief's eyes wandered further down, they came to the valley's floodlit metal floor, and the many bits of construction gear positioned all over the place. Enforcers were busy moving equipment and containers around, the facility a bustling hive of activity even in the depths of night. Sentinel patrols cruised around, covering every inch of the place. And still there was more to the facility.

Directly below him, virtually crossing from one cliff all the way to the other, an insanely large, circular pit, lined with more ledges, plinths and construction gear. Even with the MJOLNIR's zoom capabilities, the Chief couldn't see the bottom. Like the rest of the valley, there was activity aplenty, with something possibly under construction down in the deeper depths. But before his squinting eyes could pick out anything definite, the others arrived.

One by one, they moved to the edge. None of the pilots disembarked from their vehicles, so presumably they had other ways of seeing. One of them let out a long whistle sounding noise, audible even through the heavy layers of armour.

"_Do I see what I think I see?_"

"_You do indeed Espada 2C. Forerunner foundry class facility. I think we just found ourselves a solution to our problems, hee hee!_"

"_So, time to dispose of the trash?_"

A message appeared on the Chief's HUD, even as he began backing away, suddenly more than a little concerned.

-_RUN!_"

Regardless of where the message came from, it was too late. For then, every single one of the machines turned their weapons at him, and opened fire...

###

****Author's Notes****

And so, another chapter comes to an end. Once again, the word count has dropped, but I think this one went better than the last.

So, Espada, Rigel, Razgriz and Pixy. I chose those names for a reason, not just because I'm a big fan of the Ace Combat series. Each

one of those names has something in common, and it may be worth guessing the connection. In Razgriz's case, it's more of a technicality, but it still applies.

I can't help but notice that the last time I got a review was back in chapter 4. I don't suppose anyone minds dropping me another, just to let me know how I'm doing? I know people are still adding this to their favourites, which is good news, but it would be nice to get some feedback as well. It doesn't have to be much, just a few lines will do.

Anyway, thanks for reading, see you next time!

-Next Phase: ...Or Do We Fall Divided..?

9. Phase 9: Or do we Fall Divided?

****Halo: Genetics****

(A/N): Uh, still no reviews. Come on guys, please?

...

Just read Halo: Glasslands. Expect me to start incorporating elements of that from here on. Well, got to keep the outside universe as close to canon as possible, right? Especially if I'm still trying to fit this between Halo 3 and the upcoming 4.

Also, from now on I'll be placing little profiles for new machines at the bottom of some chapters... but usually no more than one at a time. This time, I'll be putting the Blade down there, the C. IV's will have to wait till next time.

****Glossary****

County: In the U.S.A., the country is partitioned into states. Well, over here in England, we have counties instead. Same sort of thing (except, you know, smaller), different name.

Fist of Rukt: Cast your mind back to Halo 2, and you may remember Tartarus sending you into the afterlife with a dirty great big hammer. Well, it may never be mentioned in the games, but officially the thing has a name â€" the Fist of Rukt. It's somewhat difficult to determine what happened to it after that battle, although the Final Grunt in Halo 3 (Easter egg) mentions having it...

Type 33 Guided Munitions Launcher â€" the Needler, one of the more useful weapons if used correctly. Just seven needles, and the poor target suffers an unfortunate explosive accident.

Disclaimer: Take a look back at every chapter so far, more precisely at the disclaimers in them. Notice a trend? The meat and bones of the Halo universe belong to 343 Industries, but the various marines named here are mine. Ditto for Archon, any local Monitor personalities, the "Solar Wind" forces, the Blade II, and the latest Sentinel. Specifically, the one preceded by a "G". Any characters or ships appearing in person for the first two sections, are also mine. Everything else, technically 343 Industries' property.

****Phase 9: ...Or do we Fall Divided..?***

Deep Space, "Eye of the Prophets" Nebula

Nebulae, were beautiful things. They symbolised creation and destruction alike, although you would have to be at least partially versed in astrophysics to know this. They were the remnants of long dead stars, the visible leftovers of that most violent of cosmic events – the supernova.

When a star reaches the end of its life, it has two options available to it. The smaller ones just... fade away, deteriorating to a white dwarf, and then eventually to a black dwarf. As the light burning within gradually goes out, the star dies a slow, quiet death, as if it has simply... lost the will to live. This is the ultimate fate of our own sun.

Alternatively, a star may decide "screw this, if I'm going down, I'm taking as much of the universe as I can with me!". One way or another, events conspire to force the star to detonate, blasting huge amounts of material from its surface. Over a period of a few weeks, the star literally tears itself apart, with the shed material forming dust clouds, or nebulae as they are more commonly known. As for the core, well, that's another story for another day. There are other ways a nebula can form, but that's the most common. And nebulae can also be the beginning of things...

Sangheili, for the most part, didn't know and didn't care. Long had they been the warriors of the Covenant, constantly vying with the Jiralhanae for position of Prophet's favoured. Many millennia of that are bound to result in a species losing theoreticians by the score, channelling the entire will of the race towards one thing: War! It was true that there were some great Sangheili thinkers, but their skills leaned more towards the cruel world of strategy than realms of star theories.

The great warship Faith Through Fury hung silently on the outskirts of the vast, blue eye of the nebula. Streaked with blood red, the celestial waymark would have been a popular rendezvous point for Sangheili ships, had it not been so inconveniently placed in the back of beyond. It was rarely visited, rarely seen, rarely used. All in all, a perfect place for Faith Through Fury and its scant companion ships to utilise. As the Assault Cruiser and its accompanying CCS class battle cruiser Flame of Conviction cruised slowly onwards, one might have been forgiven for worrying just who was going to be on the wrong end of their plasma cannons. A valid worry, but one misplaced. The greatest threat these ships faced, was each other.

Iridescent green. The great schism had presented the Sangheili with a problem. With both the Separatists and Loyalists using the same weapons, the same vehicles, the same ships, there had to be a way to tell the forces of the two sides apart. The solution, was simplicity incarnate. The Sangheili chose to re-colour their forces away from the symbol of the old, the religious purple that constantly reminded them of the follies of the past, to the new; a bright reflective green, a symbol of the new ways to come. For regardless of what those ways were to be, they would be the Sangheili's ways, not the will of the San-Shyuum imposed from above.

If only the Sangheili were as unified as their outward decisions suggested. Hidden in plain view, the Sangheili were undergoing their own, personal schism. There were two sides to every argument, the former Arbiter, Thel 'Vadam (assuming he was still alive â€" contact with Sanghelios or the UNSC key worlds was sketchy at best), was an outspoken advocate of peace with the humans, if not outright allegiance. So far, his influence maintained the upper hand, but the opposition, the ones who saw the humans as a threat, were never far behind. And the lines were harder to read than even this.

Humans, too, were involved. Once again, it was the Office of Naval Intelligence that was stirring the simmering brew, heedless of just where said brew was likely to explode. Covertly, hiding their actions from even Lord Hood, they had retrieved and returned former Sangheili weapons _to the advocates of war_. Admiral Margaret Parangosky, the instigator of the whole affair, had taken the view that while the entire opposition were bickering amongst themselves, they wouldn't be turning their weapons on Earth.

You can see where the flaws in this argument are, can't you? Think about it. If you deliberately stir up trouble, you're hardly lending credence to the people who are saying that you are friends, are you?

Even on individual starships such as _Faith Through Fury_ or _Flame of Conviction_, it was difficult to tell just which side it would default to should the internal Sangheili hostilities go live. It was just so difficult to root out any anti-peace dissidents, especially when most of them were lying low, waiting for their moment. These sleek, armed to the teeth vessels, were officially followers of Thel 'Vadam's policies. But in time? Who knew?

It certainly made the lives of a certain pair of UNSC crews rather interesting, to say the least. For the predatory Sangheili ships were not alone out here. Accompanying them, looking distinctly outmatched when MAC cannons were weighed up against plasma turrets and torpedoes, Titanium-A armour against energy shielding, were two human starships.

They were the _UNSC Infinity's Ice_, a Stalwart class frigate, and the Krakatoa class supercarrier, _UNSC Wings of Eternal Virtue_. Two ships, each one the best that the humans could offer, but not a patch on even one of the Sangheili cruisers. It was well known that, without some strategies of _very_ dubious nature (nuclear minefields, sudden ambushes, the use of Cradles as shields, the infamous Keyes loop), that the only way a human fleet could beat a Covenant one, was if it had at least a three to one advantage in weight. And even then, they'd take heavy casualties â€" it only took one plasma torpedo to gut a regular human ship, while Covenant vessels fell to a _minimum_ of _three_ depleted uranium MAC rounds. Hell, they'd even been known to hold up to Shiva nuclear warheads going off in close proximity!

So, even hardened and experienced veterans like Commander Duncan Hicker had moments when they were noticeably nervy. Being in such a precarious situation will do that to you.

This, was one of those situations. As he stood in the centre of his ship's bridge, watching the _Wings of Eternal Virtue_ crew silently carry out their assigned duties, he steelled himself for the worst. A

discussion with the Sangheili shipmaster Nal 'Vataee was in the making.

A blue figure coalesced into view alongside, a tall hairy, bearskin wearing savage that gave the impression of primitive stupidity. Ug, the supercarrier's resident smart AI, liked it that way. Even a Jiralhanae could see that a caveman wasn't going to be much good at intelligent talk, which only caught them all the more off guard when they found themselves intellectually manoeuvred into a corner. It helped that he normally played up the dumb part, meeting expectations until right when the switch would hurt the opposition the most.

"Ug worried. Ug think-

"Ug, proper English please. You don't need to put on the charade for us."

Hicker had heard this opening more times than he'd had cold showers, the AI often used it to break the mood. Sometimes it worked " more often than no actually " but in this case it dispelled the tension for about ten milliseconds. In other words, not actually long enough to be noticeable. Still, the AI had presumably calculated that the potential effect was worth the slight damage to his image. Or rather, miscalculated in this instance. He was quick to recover.

"As you wish Commander." he said, straightening from his semi slouch and fingering the translucent bone entwined in his digital, matted hair. It made for a surreal experience, speaking to a caveman smarter than the entire bridge crew put together.

"I can't help but worry," he continued, "about the situation. I've checked the information on that tape " the last access date was two days ago. Now, considering that the Kig-Yar like to make quick getaways before whoever they happen to be scamming catches on, what does that imply?"

Hicker didn't need to answer, he'd had the very thought himself. Judging from the beacon's original location and the possible journey times, a certain amount of diversions had been possible. And there had been rumours of Jiralhanae cruisers roaming in and around this sector, looking for targets of opportunity and just not realising that most of the local Sangheili colonies had collapsed, their populations migrating inwards to Sanghelios.

"What do you reckon it'll take to get her off our backs? Reckon old the old hinge head is reconnecting his jaw, having taken advantage of an early meal?"

Hicker almost snorted at that mental image, the "noble Sangheili" compared to a snake unhinging its jaw. Ug must have realised his mistake, because he turned to the commander, and started using his long club in the fashion of a teacher's baton.

"Correction, Commander " snakes don't unhinge their jaw to swallow large prey, some of the bones just bend. But my suggestion stands."

Ug, was apparently a little distracted at the moment. It was only to be expected " like all AI's tied into a ship's mainframe, he was multitasking countless minor operations " life support, sensors,

internal security, engines, shields, communicationsâ€¦ and goodness knew how many different conversations with various crewmembers, including one with the Commander right now. And so, he must have been too overloaded to notice the small vessel leaving the Flame of Conviction. Indeed, he did spot it, but it took a second or two, by which time Hicker's brain had just received its first alert from his eyes. And by the time the AI began to speak, Hicker too was opening his mouth.

"Well, there goes that idea!"

They stopped, looked at each other, and grinned. It wasn't often that a human managed to counterpart an AI's voice so successfully, and even the most hard bitten human could see the funny side to things.

On the primary viewscreen, the small purple ship vectored (rather clumsily in Hicker's opinion) outwards, angling for a distant star around which there was supposedly a small Kig-Yar colony. More likely a large one, considering the reliability of reports originating with supposed Kig-Yar "traitors". It reached a considerate distance from the flotilla, and within the span of a pair of heartbeats, opened a tiny slipspace portal and disappeared.

For some reason, Hicker doubted they'd seen the last of the Fated Opportunity. When a Kig-Yar acts that interested and still sells the information that has the skinny alien dancing with anticipation, trouble can only be brewing its most unpleasant of beverages. Evidentially a certain Sangheili shipmaster thought the same, because within moments the viewscreen changed channels to the visage of a nightmare. A "cultured" nightmare, but a nightmare still.

Clad in luminescent white armour, shipmaster Nal 'Vataee was an imposing sight. Even through the limited medium of a 2D viewscreen image, the two and a quarter metre tall Sangheili still radiated an aura of unstoppable strength, a strength that had once been turned to bear on the entirety of the human race, but now faced elsewhere. Whether Jiralhanae, Kig-Yar pirates, (thankfully rare) Flood infestation, or their own species, the humans were officially off the menu. It didn't quite give Hicker peace of mind; he was one of the few who knew what ONI had been up to in past years. So far, he'd managed to keep ONI from realising thatâ€¦ he hoped.

The shipmaster took the first turn in the latest verbal duel, voice a definite growl.

"Graargh. If I have to deal with one more stinking coward, I swear on the Forerunner's grave that it will be as I bombard their nearest colony to dust."

"Getting to you are they? I thought the Privateer II left a bit fast."

The shipmaster glared at the AI, who met the gaze unfazed. Even after three Earth months, he still hadn't overcome his dislike of human AIs. Covenant AIs were simpler â€" they did their work quietly and didn't answer back. It didn't help that Ug had tried his usual dumb shtick and been rapidly caught out, the Sangheili nearly exploding with anger at the deception. Still, for the moment Nal 'Vataee was already enraged at something else, and some set of cogs in his brain

decided that it would be better to let that rage run to its conclusion before turning on another brain boiler.

"Kig-YAR!" the shipmaster vocalised, the name somehow becoming a curse in his mouth. "That so called... shipmistress, that... Shrii... May the Flood take her and all her hell sworn kind! If it wasn't for honour, I'd have had her impaled before she could take but a single step onto my ship!"

Hicker maintained a still, stony visage. A Sangheili's ire was a dangerous thing, an animal just barely held in check. But once loosed, it didn't need a reason, it just struck. There was no need to interrupt. And it wasn't as if he disagreed with what the shipmaster was saying.

"I sometimes wonder why we bother with this tiresome pretence of friendship. You can't trust a Kig-Yar, under no circumstances should you give one an unprotected back. I had my subordinates check her vessel while she was trying to wheedle trivialities from me, and you know what they found? What was on that foul, odorous ship?"

It took Hicker a moment to realise that he'd been asked a question. Resisting the urge to stutter or otherwise show his state of nerves, he gave the (too him) obvious answer.

"A horde of pirates looking to sneak onboard and raid your supplies? A stockpile of previous trophies"

Nal 'Vataee snorted, quite a sight for a Sangheili.

"If only we were so lucky... at least then my warriors would have had some target practice! No, we found nothing. Damaged, worthless scrap of the ancients. Four Huragok being worked like slaves. But nothing of value. No other slimy Kig-Yar lurking in the shadows, biding their time. We took the Huragok, payment for our troubles. As for the rest, trash for a pestilent beggar."

"Hold on," asked Ug, tapping a finger on his club, "if there was only one Kig-Yar on board, what happened to the rest? I've never heard of Kig-Yar going into solo ventures before."

Nal 'Vataee failed to answer, expression thunderous even for a Sangheili. At least, Hicker assumed it was. Three months were not nearly enough to learn alien facial expressions to any degree of accuracy, Gods, Hicker still hadn't identified the shipmaster's "happy face". Yes, that was assuming that there was such a thing. Even if Nal 'Vataee seemed angry on a very much permanent basis.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to share your thoughts..? Please?"

The shipmaster was, but apparently not at the request of a devious AI such as Ug. Actually, it was doubtful he'd reply if it was Cortana who'd posed the question, so what chance did an unproven Artificial Intelligence have?

"Starved, poisoned, spaced, who cares? It's a pity they couldn't have taken their murderer down with them. If it hadn't been for the information..."

He didn't finish, looking a little distant. Hicker silently registered the Sangheili's tongue twitch towards the split lips, hinting at the thoughts passing through the shipmaster's brain. He'd heard of Kig-Yar eating, or at least threatening to eat, Sangheili, but never the other way round. Well, first time for everything, or so the saying went. And considering the shipmaster had had to... deal with "shipmistress Shrui 'R-Yar" for the last couple of hours, he probably had his reasons. Ug had been surprisingly insightful with the jaw joke earlier.

"Well, you can relax," the AI said, sending another glower across the Sangheili's face. "It turns out that the information was very valuable. We've apparently stumbled across the resolution to a little mystery that's been bugging us for some time now."

Hicker stared at his incorporeal companion, aware that the Sangheili was doing the same.

"What, Ug? I know my history as well as anyone, and ships go missing all the time. Why would information on this one be considered so special?"

"Well, a little black box once told me something of interest. Not much, just a throwaway line, but it got me thinking. So, I decided to do a little investigation."

"Let me guess... ONI?"

"Maybe. Let me just say that perhaps this ship is both lost and found. I wouldn't know for certain until we find out more. And I think this warrants a little investigation, don't you?"

Hicker wasn't too sure. As well as assisting these Sangheili ships in hunting down Jiralhanae raiders, the standing orders from FleetCom did allow a small amount of leeway. Following this message might have been pushing the boundaries a bit too far however. As his mind struggled to come up with a response, one quiet little thought gently pushed its way to the front, and stood there. Not fighting, not shouting, just waiting to be noticed. Such thoughts usually win out against the louder, more outspoken ideas, they have a determination that somehow gets them followed.

Never leave a man behind.

...

Hicker sighed. NavCom on the whole would understand, would probably support him when word got around, even if NavLogCom complained about having to find something to fill the gap in the meantime. And it wasn't as if there were no other UNSC ships in the vicinity...

"Ug, send word to the Eternity. Tell them what we plan to do, and that our friends need replacement assistance."

The UNSC Eternity was an Infinity class vessel patrolling the sector and generally acting as a rapid response Sangheili defence augments. It could afford to be reassigned tempora-

"Wait."

Hicker looked back at the viewscreen, the image of Nal 'Vataee still very much dominating it. The shipmaster looked calmer, thoughtful even, clearly having come to a decision.

"We will go with you."

"Are you sure?" asked Hicker, almost disbelieving the evidence presented by his ears.

"We have an honour debt to repay. If it wasn't for you and your... help, the cursed Jiralhanae and their thrice cursed ambush two weeks past would have finished us. No true warrior would let that pass unpaid. And the cowards won't be back until they've licked their wounds."

"Are you willing to risk your honour on a possible wild goose chase, one that may cost you a world if you guess wrong?"

"This... "goose" as you call it, may be worth the risk. And your _Eternity_ is still ready to cover the sector. We will go."

Hicker refused the impression to face palm. The Shipmaster, intelligent as he was, had clearly grabbed the wrong end of the wild goose stick, but it was also clear that he wasn't going to be dissuaded. And extra help wouldn't go amiss. He sighed, and signalled Ug to make the necessary calls...

###

Deep Space, Eye of the Prophet Nebula â€" Sangheili ship Flame of Conviction

Despite the vehemence held by the shipmaster against the Kig-Yar, and in fact shared by the entire Sangheili race, there _were_ Jackals to be found under his command. Only a few to be sure, and only on the _Flame of Conviction_, where the shipmaster wouldn't run the risk of accidentally encountering their "diseased hides".

Tas and Cor, were two such Jackals. Holed up in the "auxiliary quarters" with a scant eight more of their kind, they whiled away their time away keeping out of sight, letting the herd of chattering Unggoy and occasional stoic Mgalekgolo distract absurdly vigorous attention.

They were snipers, all of the Kig-Yar aboard were. If there was one thing, _just_ one thing that the Sangheili held grudging respect for, at least where the Kig-Yar were concerned, it was the latter's ability to accurately snipe from halfway across the county. That didn't mean they had to _trust_ them, but they could use them. Trust, now that wouldn't come for a long time, not even if a certain auxiliary lost that Fist of Rukt that he'd been hauling around.

Ditching the mighty war hammer, once the property of the feared Jiralhanae chieftain Tartarus, was not the first thing on Tas' mind. Especially considering the trouble he'd gone through to "acquire" it in the first place. Even now, as he carefully polished the antique, he found himself nearly stroking the weapon. Matters weren't helped by his secret fascination with all things albino chieftain â€" he

even had a white finger stashed under a loose bit of deck plating! Suitably packed of course, for one thing Tas didn't want the thing decomposing, and for another, the smell would probably draw someone's attention. That "Someone" most likely to be Cor, who would turn it into an appetiser.

Meanwhile, Cor had a few disputes with his companion. How was one supposed to get any sleep when their roommate kept muttering? Complain? Well there could be a slight problemâ€¦ You see, there were two "leaders" amongst the Kig-Yar auxiliaries, and Cor wasn't one of them. Tas, was. And while there was the usual Kig-Yar style of diplomacy, around here the guards would take notice, not to mention disagree.

â€¦Cor wasn't that sort of Kig-Yar anywayâ€¦ which meant most would say that he wasn't an actual Kig-Yar. Well, so what? He didn't really care. As the humans (and the odd Unggoy overdosed on human entertainment) said, every "family" has its black sheep. Which was why he turned over in his bunk to face Tas, hissed, and clamped hands to ear holes.

The other looked over his shoulder, huffed, and went back to polishing.

"Will your trap ever stop whining?" he hissed, "I swear you sound like a whimpering Unggoy freshly pulled off the teat!"

Cor didn't rise to the bait. Last time he'd failed to keep his mouth in check, the local Sangheili guard had taken perverse pleasure in beating the two of them unconscious. Of course, there was nothing stopping him thinking his response; Tough talk for someone who needs an anti-grav bangle to support his weapon. That wasn't just referring to the Fist of Rukt either â€" his type 50 sniper rifle system had the same augmentation. Tas, was weedy even for a Kig-Yar. Perhaps this was the reason why he collected those absurd mementos â€" maybe he saw them as talismans of strength or something. Eayn knew, he seemed a little unhinged at times.

"_..ta...ham...f...ly he..ould...then th...wo...know ven..._"

Cor rolled over on his bunk, hoping against hope that a blanket rolled around the head would stop the noise. It did, but was about as comfortable as putting your head into a Jiralhanae's mouth. Probably as fatal in the long run as well, but for the short term, the rough material wasn't doing his tender skin any favours either. If he was lucky, the other Kig-Yar would shut up in the next couple of minutes, but it was more likely that the only way to end his torment was to swallow the blanket and choke to death.

...

Something told him that Tas wouldn't care one bit if he did try that way out. The two Kig-Yar had disliked each other from the first, which was possibly a culprit reason in why the two had been lumped into the same cabin. That Sangheili warrior had been mandible grinning all too much when he'd shown the two of them in, and watched them argue over choice of bunks. Kig-Yar being Kig-Yar, Tas had won that one when he'd pulled a Type 33 Guided Munitions Launcher and threatened to literally disarm his opponent. Cor having forgotten to pack his Type 25, conceded defeat at that point, and got stuck

with the metal slab that dared call itself a bunk.

Getting his mind off the whole depressing affair, Cor reached down the gap between bunk and bulkhead, and pulled out his handheld... device. To any Sangheili that bothered to check, the tiny claw sized gizmo would appear to be a simple entertainment player â€" a small screen, various files stored in memory â€" something you'd expect an Unggoy to be lugging around. Not exactly contraband then, unless you happened to touch a tiny little switch here and another button concealed here, in which case you'd find yourself staring at yourself from the nearest security camera. Now that would make it contraband.

The little security tapper, or "eye hijacker", EyeHi for short, as Cor inexplicably called it, was a personal invention. While he didn't have many of the normal Kig-Yar personality traits, he didn't mind a little hacking now and then, and was a fair hand at technical jiggy pokery. The EyeHi automatically located any nearby security system, and started piggybacking the data. And that meant that using it, Cor could quite easily get a camera eye view of anywhere on the ship. So far the simple AI monitoring the system hadn't quite caught on to these little incursions.

Right now, the camera being used was on the bridge, a high up lens that revealed the currently empty command throne, and a few Sangheili busy with consoles down in the crew pits. Off in the corner, almost lost in the shadow, a large shape loomed menacingly. It was, Cor decided after a bit of squinting, a bonded Mgalekgolo, which meant there must be another lurking somewhere off camera. After a moment's contemplation, he dismissed the thought, and focussed on the forward viewscreen.

A view of the stars beckoned. Fully half of the image was taken up by the majestic Faith through Fury, its emerald hull paralleling the course of the UNSC frigate. With the Flame of Conviction holed up in the rear, it could only mean that they were getting ready to make a slipspace jump... had all of the damage from that last battle been repaired? If so, the few Huragok on board must have worked with uncharacteristic haste, something not likely even if the alternative was watching the Unggoy generally wreck the place with their "help".

Or... was there another reason for the jump? Had something come up, some news that required immediate action? Either way, the fact remained, they were moving out. And with luck, ground combat would soon be beckoning.

On the screen within a screen, the other UNSC ship, the supercarrier hove into view. Across its hull, twinkling light, static electricity. The considerably sized ship shunted its power into its advanced, Forerunner tech enhanced slipspace engines, and opened a huge, seething blue and white portal, a gateway looking into infinity.

As one, the flotilla ships fired up their engines, and entered the portal. The journey to parts unknown, had begun...

###

Archon â€" Sector 16, Overlooking Foundry facility (Archon Occupation â€" Day 4-5, Midnight)_

#####Wait... which side are you on again?#####

It was the speed of machines, against human reflexes. By all accounts, the outcome should have been certain, as eight C. IV mechs and a quartet of wheeled Servicers sent a hell of a bullet fire at the lone SPARTAN II. And yet, against all conceivable odds, every single bullet passed through thin air, impacting the ground and rocky pinnacles, leaving the pilots " safe inside their machines but reliant on external sensors, somewhat confused.

The Chief couldn't say the same. From his currently crouched position at the shadowy base of a rocky spire, on the other side of which were twelve very hostile death machines, he knew exactly what had happened. And he was shocked.

"Serina..." he said accusingly. "What did you do?"

"Just saved both our butts from certain death. I know, brilliant, you can thank me later."

"But... you... have you any idea how wrong that was?" The Chief wasn't normally one to be lost for words, but Serina had just performed an action that was downright... inhumane. While the Chief had been frozen, yet to react, she'd taken control of the MJOLNIR and rolled him sideways, behind cover. True, she had just saved their lives, but principles had been broken! Have you any idea what it feels like, to have your body suddenly move without your intention? How it feels to have it just... run away from your control? Well, a suit of MJOLNIR isn't exactly a SPARTAN's physical body, but the Chief had been in his so long that it was almost a part of him. An extension, and to him, it was him. Serina had just bodyjacked him!

"In my eyes, no. Without my actions, your shield would have held for less than a second, you may have begun moving, but you'd have been turned into Swiss cheese before you could move a step. And then where would I be?"

"It went against every human right there is!"

"Every result has its price. Now, you want to get us out of here, or shall I do the honours?"

That pulled him up short. There was no way he was going to let her do that to him again; he felt violated. As Serina released the armour back to his control, he silently swore that the first opportunity, she was out. He'd find Cortana without her "help".

He raised himself up, grasped the SPARTAN laser, and listened... The whining of servos drifted around the spire, a sure sign that the mechs were moving out. And he was certain they hadn't given up on hunting him down " by now they'd have realised where he'd gone. Sighting another spire, and a dip beyond, he took a gamble and threw himself for it. Buzzing bees swarmed past, a rough analogy for the stream of bullets. But they mostly missed, and his shields held. Dropped to half yes, but that was quite a good result...

Until the mass augmented plasma burst flashed past and shattered the rocky spire into a hundred shards. They were still falling to the

ground, as he plunged down the slope, saw the cliff edge in front of him, and was forced to throw himself again, this time to the side. Another spire, and the Chief quickly slotted himself behind it. He looked on, still deciding whether the light of the "Foundry" facility was more of a benefit or a hindrance. There was no need to use his flashlight and thus betray his position, that was true, but it was also true that his hunters could see him without the requirement of night vision. All in all, a roughly even playing field... if he _wasn't_ outnumbered twelve to one. Even twelve Grunts could cause him trouble if they all attacked at once, twelve machines armed with Enforcer busting weaponry was enough to make any realistic super soldier start looking for ways to even the odds... or just get away from them.

He checked the next section of open ground, aware that the thudding footfalls of incoming mechs were getting closer by the second. How long did he have? Thirty seconds? Ten? The next line of cover was a good forty metres off, too far under that level of concentrated fire. Which left only one conceivable option, as Serina kindly pointed out.

"Try the cliff. Anything's better than the other option you're contemplating."

Fine, when she put it _that_ way, what choice did he have? He went prone, and scrambled for the precipice. Looking down, he saw two things that made him wonder if Lady Luck really did exist – a number of Sentinels on the ascent, clearly drawn by weapons fire, and more important to his immediate survival, a ledge just below his position. It was nearly hidden from above by an overhang, so...

He swung himself from the edge, and dropped. A second later, he grabbed, fingers scrambling for purchase on the brittle rock. For one fearful moment, he thought he'd missed, would keep on falling until his body became just another smear on the valley's metal floor, but then, success! As he pulled himself over the edge and into the depths of the overhang, the Sentinels soared past. A moment later, a few of them came down again... and kept on going. The staccato sound of gunfire above gave the reason.

Leaving the two combating sides to distract each other above, the Chief began inching his way along the ledge, keeping the wall to his left. It wasn't easy, as explosions from above began to shake the earth. The reverberations caused a section of the ledge behind to give way, but the rest remained stable... for now. He picked up the pace, and rounded a corner, giving him an unprecedented view down the valley.

Some distance on, a series of curving ramps marked where the former road must have made its descent. Once, maybe, large and heavy vehicles could have trundled up and down that sequence of artificial ledges and loops, carrying materials and who knew what else to the valley floor and back again. But not now. Now, the twinned effects of weather and time had eroded them, to the point that a M274 Mongoose ATV would have been hard pushed to stick to those trails, running the risk of sliding off and down all the way.

The next wave of Sentinels floated upwards, a couple having a glance before floating onwards to deal with the _real_ threat. Grateful for the moment's grace, the Chief made himself scarce, or as close to it

as he could considering he was confined to such a narrow ledge... actually, no he wasn't, because the ledge soon came to an end. He looked down, finding naught but a sheer drop, the next ledge some fifty metres below. SPARTAN or not, a fall from that height would break every bone in his body, and that was assuming he actually hit the half metre wide rocky shelve. Which left just one direction. Up.

"Come on SPARTAN, head first into hell. You don't mind if I move myself to, say, the chips down in your boots, do you?"

"Do as you want." The Chief responded, curtly. She wasn't in his good books at the moment. And he wasn't entirely sure whether he should move yet " by his estimates he was at most a hundred metres along the plateau from where he'd dropped to the ledge, which wasn't quite far enough to be safe...

...To Hell with it, he didn't have any other choice! He put his hands up, grasped the cliff top and pulled himself up. As his eyes came above the edge, he instantly analysed the situation. Still a fairly open bit of ground immediately in front of him, but at least the number of wind shaped spires and columns was much higher. The plateau was narrower here, so it couldn't be too far to the road and his rendezvous with the marines hiding amongst the rocks above.

To the left, a net of searing orange and blue beams were partitioning the sky, their sources ducking and weaving through the rocks. Gunfire could still be heard, but only sporadically, as if the C. IV's weren't willing to keep wasting ammo unless they could actually see their targets. The Chief allowed himself a slight grin, knowing that for now at least, any and all machines were thoroughly preoccupied. He turned and began making for the other side of the plateau.

...Only to be caught completely off guard as a ruby red beam slammed into his arm. The shield depleted tone sounded off with a vengeance, and the Chief once again hit the dirt. In front of him, a wheeled shape backed up, reversing behind an oblong rock. Okay, so they're not all distracted then. As a trio of green energy bursts appeared over the peak of the rock, arcing in his direction in a fashion similar to a mortar, he scrambled to his feet and charged into the shadow of a trio of spires, joined at the base. Behind him, the "mortars" hit dirt and blew a sizeable crater in the ground. Not exactly plasma railgun weaponry, but for something that had seemed minimally armed, the Servicer was full of surprises.

Quickly, he calculated his next move. A quick glance around the side of his cover revealed the Servicer, prowling amongst the rocks near where he'd first spotted it. And worse " another one too, not to mention a single C. IV mech. So now it was three to one; better, but hardly ideal. He was curious why they weren't closing with his position-

"Got the SPARTAN laser ready? You may need to shoot our way out."

Ah, that would be why. Considering the bulky weapon could gut Wraiths, even the C. IV's would do well to be wary. And the Servicers? Yes, them too.

Laser ready, he glanced once more. The Servicers were wheeling in opposite directions, no doubt aiming to find a clear line of fire and catch him in a crossfire. The C. IV... had vanished. Not a good sign. And with that thought, the Chief made a dash for it.

Ducking and weaving, he swerved across a narrow band of open ground. The Servicers saw him, opened fire with rotary machine guns that came worryingly close to hitting him. Another green energy mortar hit the next spire, sending jagged cracks upwards and down. The Chief decided not to take his chances with that compromised cover, and sped past, leaping a tiny fissure and dropping into a small hollow just beyond. And then, tired of just running, he readied the SPARTAN laser and popped his head above the hollow's rim.

A Servicer was just manoeuvring in between two natural columns. Once again unwilling to wait for full charge, the Chief depressed the trigger early, sending multiple shards of ruby light the vehicle's way. To be honest, he wasn't expecting much, and wasn't entirely surprised to see a hazy elongated sphere flicker into the visible spectrum as the beam hit it. The Servicer, safe within its transparent shell, was spared it seemed... until the shield suddenly flickered away and the tail end of the dying beam tore a hole into the vehicle's sloped front.

Understandably, it beat a hurried retreat at that point. Together with its companion, it wisely chose to return to the main battle, and find some easier prey. Say, a few Sentinels.

As the Servicers tore off, the Chief let out a quiet sigh. At least he knew the Solar Wind support vehicles could be damaged by human weaponry, even if the jury was still out on the C. IV's potential resistance... but it wouldn't be for long. The whine of mech actuators returned, as the nose of the mech appeared around a spire twenty metres uphill. It was between him and the road, between him and his escape route, and between him and the marines. The hunt, was still on...

...

Up above, eyes hidden among the rocky slopes watched the disturbance with... curiosity. Its mind a jumble of confused impulses, all struggling for dominion, the dispersed entity was nonetheless stilled as a single thought overcame all others.

One of the combatants below...

Familiarity...

...

As the mech began closing the distance, the Chief chose to move. Crawling from the hollow, he scrambled along a shallow ditch that curved around behind yet more spires. Guessing that the C. IV's pilots would soon figure out the ploy, he took a slight gamble and left the ditch early, crawling against the leeward side of a low but long boulder. As a smoking, sparking Sentinel passed overhead, angling away from the main battle in a bid to escape, and getting shot down by the wayward C. IV for its trouble, the Chief realised he'd just made a critical error. He'd just surfaced in the midst of a fairly large clump of, say thirty spires... surrounded by a sizeable

ring of bare ground. It would be nearly impossible to cross that gap without being spotted, and holed from behind. Without some sort of distraction, he was stuck with a tireless machine, in a game of cat and mouse that could only end one way...

The red blob on the motion tracker began circling the cluster of spires in an anti clockwise direction, the C. IV looking inwards all the while for that one, clean shot. As the Chief shimmied around his current cover, always keeping the mech on the far side, he came to a conclusion. If he kept up like this, then sooner or later the mech would catch him off guard. But if he could do some damage to it first... once again, he readied his laser. Holding his position, he let the charge build to full and trained the laser designator on a gap between two of the outermost pinnacles. The motion tracker's red blip continued to move, and sure enough, the mech's small head soon appeared in view. He held off a moment longer, waited until that inconspicuous looking cylinder " the left side plasma railgun " reflected his laser sight...

He activated the SPARTAN laser, and prayed...

Fate it seemed, was truly on his side this night. Once again the laser hit true, gouging into the side of the machine. Unlike the Servicer, no shield appeared to diminish its effect, and so the railgun became history... even if the rest of the mech survived intact. The golden walker now sported a horrible sparking gash, torn into its armour. It swayed, giving the Chief one moment of inward cheer when it looked like the machine would topple onto its side. But, no such luck. One of the pilots within managed to stabilise the vehicle, and next moment the C. IV pelted his position with gunfire. The Chief wisely retracted his head back behind cover at that point.

Watching the motion tracker again, he saw the C. IV do something unexpected. Rather than turn and begin its patrol again in the opposite direction, presenting him with its undamaged side, it turned a mere ninety degrees and began advancing into the spires. The hunt had entered a new, deadlier phase, one in which it would be much harder to predict the opposition's movements and probable line o-

Whenever you believe things can't possibly get any worse... The motion tracker flickered, and disappeared.

"Serina! _What are you doing_?" he shouted into his mike.

"Nothing!" she responded, sounding as shocked as he was. "You know the saying; If it ain't broke, don't fix it! It just turned itself off!"

"My armour does _not_ just turn vital functions off! Get it back on, _now_!"

"Working on it, primitive!"

Great. The one advantage he had, and it had just disappeared. Now all he had to go on, was his hearing. And with that raging, _noisy_ battle still going on just up plateau, that could be difficult. He sidled part of the way around the rock, caught a glimpse of a golden leg, and hurriedly withdrew. Just for good measure, he primed and

chucked a plasma grenade, before dashing for fresh cover. _Despite_ the distraction, the mech _still_ managed to launch a missile, which barely missed. And the warhead must have been proximity detonated, because it blew up immediately after. By this time, the Chief was far enough to avoid the worst of the blast, but it still halved his much abused shields. But then he was behind cover, and momentarily safe. The motion tracker wasn't back yet.

"Serina..!"

"I. Know. But I can't help you â€" something seems to have physically disconnected the system!"

"_WHAT!_"

"Don't shout, I'm having enough trouble as it is! In case you didn't know, it's attacking me now! Really, _you_ just can't keep this sort of trouble out, can you?"

"_What?_"

"Just concentrate on dodging that C. IV. I'll do what I can in here."

The Chief drew his attention back to the issue at hand, just in time to fling himself around the spire as the mech's nose appeared around another five metres away. Spotting the rear end of his antagonist, he threw another grenade, fragmentation this time. It had a depressingly small effect, leaving him to seriously consider using the SPARTAN laser again, as he ducked back out of sight. But then, he was surprised to note an overview of the immediate area, an aerial view with his position marked by a blue dot pop up in his HUD. A moment later, and the C. IV's position was displayed as well, represented by an unorthodox violet tinged gold.

"Thank you, not a motion tracker but it will do."

"Huh?"

Serina sounded puzzled. A moment later, she made some quiet noise of surprise.

"Uh... that wasn't me. That's a real time view from or- _Got you, you buggers!_"

"_What?_"

"Really, that's your favourite word at the moment, isn't it? Answer one, I've just managed to shut down some little machines that were tearing into your armour systems â€" nanomites I believe you know them as. You must have picked them up when you stepped into a colony of them in the Alchemist. And answer two, someone's transm-
MOVE!"

He quickly dodged the latest set of bullets, and tore for another set of boulders. All this talking wasn't doing much for the Chief's attention. He'd been going for a solid fifteen hours since he'd left Alpha base â€" not much for a SPARTAN under normal conditions, but with everything that had happened since the fall of Reach, he was becoming a rather weary SPARTAN. And being easier to tire out was a

side effect of that. With no opportunity to mentally rest over those fifteen hours, he'd reached the point where multitasking was getting a bit... difficult, shall we say.

Behind cover once more, he finally got an answer to the question of the tactical overview.

"_Two_, something is _transmitting_ from orbit. I'm trying to use the armour's transmitter to get a signal back, hold on a second..."

The Chief did, but took the opportunity to move again. Whoever was responsible for the latest bit of aid, he couldn't deny the overview was useful in planning his next actions. Perhaps even more useful than the motion tracker, except for the little issue that it didn't swivel with his motion.

"C. IV_ on approach from your right_." a voice said through his earpieces. It wasn't Serina. "_Calculating most probable search pattern... adding recommended movement destinations to display_."

A trio of small green dots appeared on the map, positioned further from the mech than the Chief was at the moment. Each one was accompanied by a number, counting down, and as a negative digit appeared, the dot faded.

"I think you're supposed to move when the number hits zero." Serina commented. "Hold on, I've isolated our mystery benefactor's transmission frequency, I'm going to respond."

...

"UNSC AI Serina to unknown 1, identify yourself."

...there was no answer. The Chief watched another green dot tick down and vanish, and decided that the display must be as Serina had said. He positioned himself to move towards where he judged the last point to be, tensed, and as the timer hit zero, took off. The green dot faded as his blue marker reached it, and with no sighting of his doggedly persistent hunter. Settling into position on the uphill side of this latest spire, he watched another pair of green dots and accompanying timers appear.

"UNSC AI Serina to unknown support 1 using this frequency, please identify."

This time, the voice responded.

"_Ward pilot 0A, aboard G. Sentinel. You have questions_?"

The voice was distinctly familiar â€" it was similar to that expressed by the runaway solar wind C. IV's and Servicers. But it was different too â€" it seemed calmer, more stable, more _mature_.

"Of course. I'll cut straight to the point; I'm guessing from your voice that you happen to be more Solar Wind units... so why are you helping us? If you haven't noticed, it's _your_ machines trying to do us in down here!"

The voice took a long time to answer, by which time the Chief had moved again. He sensed Serina getting impatient.

"Answer the question please." he insisted, adding his support to Serina.

"_Very well... We, that is, the few of us currently orbiting this world, are a reconnaissance team searching for answers to a certain... issue. We do not have reason to attack you; the ground forces are acting against our orders. As we our attempts to call them off have failed, we have decided to assist you in evading them... although we wonder what you are doing here in the first place... we were sure the __**Forw**_-"

"Yes, yes, no distractions. Who are you?" interrupted Serina, cutting off the beginnings of a currently irrelevant ramble.

"_Solar Wind team H04, operating under MW orders to investigate Forerunner Installations for potential clues, and where necessary, prevent Forerunner projects from harming human status._"

"So, why are your ground ta- _MW_? _Mercurial Wisdom_?"

"_Negative, we are not operating under the Monitor's authority. However, I am unable to reveal our organisation's identity to that degree. The abbreviation will stand. C. IV approaching, change your location._"

The Chief did so, ending up in a narrow ditch this time.

"_Our ground forces were attached to us by MW command, they are penal units serving mandatory danger assignments as punishment for multiple offences. As we were their means of escape, it was assumed that they would follow orders. However, the Forerunner Foundry class facility has rendered this judgement incorrect. Our remaining forces are all orbital small craft, and are unable to perform assistance in this matter beyond orbital scans. If a fight breaks out up here, then we may be of assistance but-_"

"Convenient. Well, assist us in getting out of this, and we'll talk more. You help us, we may be able to help you. Assuming that you're telling the truth of course."

"G. Sentinel_, affirmative. New target location downloaded._"

As the Chief started his next wild dash, Serina flashed one last line of text directly onto his HUD.

_Any port in a storm. As for our stance later, we'll decide that __**then**__._

###

Archon â€" Sector 16, Subterranean Complex, north of Pryda lake (Archon Occupation, Day 5 â€" Just after midnight)

Douglas cursed under his breath. That advanced Forerunner drone, that "Blade" was busy prowling around above their heads, and he was sure that something else nasty was getting ready to make its appearance. Since that first opening salvo, the SPARTAN and his marines had stayed where they were, scattered and crouched behind various different crates and containers. The Blade had been content to leave

them pinned there, only responding with weapons when the marines tried (just once) another MA5 and shotgun salvo, but otherwise leaving them alone. A few patrolling Sentinels were quick to respond with warning beams should anyone try to move from their current positions, which made it quite clear that they were waiting for something.

There were two options for that " wait for the humans to die of starvation or thirst, or wait for something to come and collect them. Waiting for reinforcements, not likely " the Blade could take them out all by its lonesome. And if that had been the case nonetheless, then why had the majority of the Sentinels buggered off elsewhere? Something smelt fishy, and it wasn't that giant squidy thing in the cage.

Douglas looked up again, tracing the route of the Blade in his head. Corner of the facility wall, to central jetty, to exit passageway, along the cavern wall and back to the facility wall. The route never changed, and nor did the machine's vigilance. All the way round, circuit after circuit, it faced towards a specific point. The part of the floor where Douglas was crouched...

Now, did that mean that it had (correctly) identified the SPARTAN as the greatest threat, or that it had some fascination with him? ...Or, was he the prize? Was a Forerunner prisoner transport even now inbound, seeking to pick him up and cart him off to some twisted laboratory, to be dissected like a common lab rat? ... Now there, was an unpleasant idea, one to be averted at all costs.

With such motivational thoughts, Douglas again scanned the harbour, every aspect of it from floor to ceiling to water. But he couldn't see any real flaw in the Blade's movement, doubly so when you remembered that there weren't any real weapons left in the human arsenal capable of damaging the drone. Just one rocket, and was he really willing to bet that would be enough to demolish both the machine, and its shields? No, it would be easier to start another cave in... that was a thought.

He looked again at the ceiling, noting every crack, every stalactite... a particularly large one soon drew his attention, out near the water's edge. If that jagged, sharp looking thing were to fall, he was willing to bet that the sheer mass alone would drive the Blade to the floor, and possibly even keep it there. Just one problem... it wasn't anywhere near the machine's patrol circuit... unless it could be tempted into a little deviation.

A plan began to form. A risky one, but as professor Anders was so fond of saying, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Quickly, he gauged which marine would be of the most use... Carther. Best position, shotgun armed, not too likely to flinch. And the other two were in good positions to take any Sentinels that took offence at what Douglas would have him do.

He signalled the other marine, getting his attention. Through a varied selection of sign language, the message soon got across, if Carther's face was to be believed. Disbelief was one emotion circling there, downright "what the hell" another. Looking like he he'd just swallowed half a pint of Mercurial Wisdom's "nutrient slurry", he signalled understanding, and readiness to begin.

First though, Douglas briefed the other two marines. Heather seemed to take the idea fairly well, with just the merest hint of a "_men!_" shrug. Lenkin on the other hand, looked at the SPARTAN as if he was mad. Maybe he was, he'd never have tried this plan under any other circumstances. With all participants ready, he waited, watching the Blade as it circled. It reached the central jetty, began heading for the exit gallery, and then...

...Douglas signalled.

"Hey rust breath! I got a present for ya!"

Carther rose from his crouch, and launched a salvo of buckshot from his shotgun, directly into the rear of his nearest Sentinel. Even as it exploded and started falling, he swivelled on another and took that out. And _then_, he fired a third blast in the direction of the Blade.

It was only for show â€" the range was too great for anything else, but the last seemed to enrage the machine. It began cruising with undeniable purpose towards the marine, charging Sentinel beams and ready to exterminate this insolent bug. As the other marines simultaneously targeted and neutralised the other few Sentinels, Douglas readied his last rocket for launch, and waited.

Carther dropped back behind his crate, mouth moving in what Douglas assumed was prayer. The Blade was heedless of the other humans, it was interested in only one thing. But even it knew that something was wrong when Douglas launched his rocket at the ceiling above its absent head. It ground to a halt.

Up above, the stalactite broke off, plunging downwards like a spear. A rocky spear, crude, massive and generally not something you'd want to be under. The Blade was exactly where Douglas wanted it...

Time froze, and the stalactite seemed to hang in midair, the Blade motionless beneath it. Douglas had seen the whole phenomenon before, something unnamed but quite similar to bullet tim... hold on a second... the _marines_ were still moving normally!

Douglas looked again. The stalactite still hung, frozen in midair, but it was the only thing so afflicted. Heather released a tiny gasp, as the Blade angled itself upwards, staring at the object so blatantly defying the laws of gravity...and everything else come to think of it. And then, while the machine was fixated by the spectacle before it, Douglas noticed something else. A silvery light, playing across the scene... he traced its source, and found himself staring at another impossibility... a crack, a fissure _in midair_.

It sat there, a mere hairline fracture not two metres from the stalactite, a line of shimmering silver. In that moment, Douglas knew that something was _very_ wrong _indeed_. But the moment passed, and the fracture vanished as if it had never been...

The stalactite resumed its original course, driving itself into, and straight through the upper eye of the Blade. Shields flickered and overloaded, and the machine hit the ground. As it exploded violently, metal shards flying across the cave, there was only one question, voiced first by Lenkin.

"Okay... what... just happened?"

###

-WARNING â€" QUANTUM RUPTURE DETECTED. CODE FF NOW IN EFFECT. LOCATE AND ISOLATE.

###

Archon â€" Sector 16, Overlooking Foundry facility (Archon Occupation, Day 5 â€" One hour after midnight)

With the assistance of the G. Sentinel, the Chief found that actually, evading the rampant C. IV wasn't all too hard. According to the orbital observers, his SPARTAN laser shot earlier had done considerable damage, destroying on plasma railgun and disrupting fragile mechanisms in the other. It was this fact which stopped the mech from just destroying the spires hiding the SPARTAN â€" that and a reluctance to waste missile ammunition. With the SPARTAN no longer being driven quite so much by desperation, he was suddenly expending far less energy. Rather than being a battle of human muscle against machine motors, it was now more of a contest of human brain versus computer mind.

A human, can process one thought at a time, but many thoughts a second. A machine, can process several lines of thought at once, completing them in microseconds. With that line of thought taken to its logical conclusion, that's a lot of thinking. If a machine has any real level of sentience and intelligence, it also picks up another notorious capability, mimicking human minds in a vague sort of way.

With that much thinking going on, unless the machine has the patience of a saint and plenty more, eventually it will reach the state of boredom. It's entirely possible that this is the reason that smart AI's go insane after a mere seven years â€" nothing to do with thinking themselves to death at all. That would explain the millennia old Monitors, still very much online and fairly capable of rational thought when they need to be, but mad as a loon the rest of the time.

...The Chief decided it might not be wise to share that little bit of wisdom with Serina, so he kept the thought to himself. He sort of doubted that mentioning it to Cortana would leave him a desirable life expectancy either...

Anyway, a vastly superior thinking capacity wasn't necessary an advantage, and this was why the C. IV eventually gave up in its fruitless hunt, and started plodding out of the spire patch. The Chief watched its tactical view representative wander off. It picked up speed, stomping along at a fair old clip and soon off the edge of the map. As that, by his estimate, was half a mile away, he guessed that he was now safe from the rampant penal units. He'd have to ask G. Sentinel the reason behind penal unit usage on Archon if he got the chance, it seemed a little odd that the nearest reliable unit to the troublemakers was up in orbit.

The battle further along the plateau had ended, whichever Monitor or local security subroutine overseeing things having finally cottoned onto the presence of a Sentinel meat grinder. He could see them now,

a dozen Sentinels and single... whatever the delta winged machine was, floating near motionless off in the centre of the valley airspace and just watching. The Chief decided that he'd wait a little longer before moving, just to be sure that the C. IV had gone. He didn't mind if the Forerunner watchers decided to cause trouble â€" even with MA5, he could take them, but the C. IV's? Yes, well, he'd rather stay out of any battles involving them, thank you very much.

The minutes ticked by, and the Sentinels too got bored. Six of them disappeared, descending vertically back to wherever in the facility below they'd come from in the first place. With one last look around, the anomaly followed. The remaining six machines... turned and headed for the far end of the plateau, the direction the C. IV had vanished in. _Not the smartest move they've ever made. If I had trouble, if your entire security force had trouble, then what chance do six of you have?_

Another couple of minutes, and the Chief rose to his feet as well. Moving slowly, the only way you can go when you've been crouched in one place for too long and have a mild case of pins and needles (an ailment even SPARTANS could contract, just not with quite such catastrophic results as being temporarily _unable to move_), he advanced towards the upper edge of the plateau, and his hoped for rendezvous. With a quick look up and down the valley, checking for threats, he hurriedly crossed the open ground and into the next maze of spires.

The G. Sentinel pilot chose that moment to modify the tactical overview, zooming out to display the current position of the penal teams. Twelve specks, at the other end of the plateau and continuing to increase the distance. Maybe they'd found another old road, maybe they were just following a rabbit trail or something. Either way, it meant they were no longer a threat, and neither was the Sentinel swarm in pursuit...

"_Warning, increased communications interference from quantum capture. We... assume contact as so... .. "_

"Gone." announced Serina. "Well, at least they kept in touch long enough to get the C. IV bored. Now, where are those Marines...?"

There was a whine from overhead, a Sentinel approaching and looking down. It didn't look friendly. With the absence of Solar Wind units, it seemed the SPARTAN had just been bumped up to the most wanted number one slot! Other Sentinels approached from multiple angles, until the Chief found himself flanked by four of the deadly machines. He readied his MA5, secure in the knowledge that he could quite easily take a mere quartet of the Forerunner security drones, even if he didn't have a spire at his back at the moment.

...Then he heard the whine of another thirty inbound, approaching rapidly from the front. _Okay, that could be trouble_.

In a flash he burst into motion, riddling the first machine with bullets... only to discover that he was actually fighting a Sentinel _Major_, and that his clip was only half full. The brilliant blue beam slicing out in response to the weakened shields sizzled its way above the Chief's head as he dropped to the floor, eyes already

noticing another beam, this one orange, searing in motion directly towards the Chief's face. He rolled to the side, found the blasted machine responsible hovering just above the ground, and gave it a whack as he passed, already back on his feet. It was only when he skidded to a halt behind a spire with a truncated top, that he realised that he'd actually managed to punch the machine right in the eye, shattering the lens and blinding it. Not that he had much time to process the thought, because his hands were busy with another important task – replacing the assault rifle's spent magazine.

A Sentinel flitted around the corner in a foolhardy attempt to get the drop on him, receiving a good twenty rounds as payment. Even as the machine hit the ground, the Chief was reaching forward, grasping the undercarriage and tearing the Sentinel beam from its housing. The MA5 had a certain charm, but he knew the benefits of an energy weapon in countering shields.

Sentinel number three decelerated into view, directly above the SPARTAN. Bad move, because the Chief was ready for it, his own beam slicing into the Sentinel's metaphorically soft underbelly. This one didn't come crashing down to ground, it just exploded in midair and scattered bits of itself all over the immediate area. _One Major, one blinded_. _Should be easy enough_.

Bad assumption, because when the Chief poked his face around the side of the spire, it nearly got hit by the former's blue beam. _What? Are they trying to predict my actions?_ _No, surely not... he suddenly began running, accelerating to top speed in under a second and charging from cover. The Major's beam followed, inconsiderately scorching a line across the top of its blinded, downed comrade as it swivelled to track the Chief. Reaching another boulder, he ducked behind it, readied the beam weapon still grasped in his hands, and leapt out, ready to fire-

...Only, it turned out not to be necessary. The Major was suddenly suffering from other issues, a good ten or so beams impaling it from the rear.

"What in the Forerunners name...?" whispered Serina. "Friendly fire?"

The Major went down, and a trickle of fresh machines emerged from the shadowed side of various bits of cover. They slowly approached, attention entirely focussed on the downed machine... and then they struck again, incinerating the machine where it lay with all their might. Maybe they had anger issues.

...One changed course, and floated towards the Chief. Curious about its intentions, he tensed, ready to run, but didn't actually move. He watched, as the machine came to a halt and waited in front of him. Elsewhere, in the periphery of his vision, a pair of Enforcers floated into view.

Sentinel and SPARTAN looked at each other for a long moment, until eventually the other's pale blue eye began to flicker. It was a regular flicker, following a certain pattern, pausing, and repeating.

"Morse code..." muttered Serina. "dot, dash, dash, dash, pause... _J_. Dash, dash, dash, pause... _O_. Dot, dot, dot, dot, pause..."

H. Dash, dot, long pause... _N_. ..._John_."

The Sentinel was still cycling the same pattern over and over, unable or unwilling to say anything else. And then he noticed the others... the others were doing the same. Even the Enforcers. "_John... John... John..._"

Realisation crashed down on him, painful though it was. There was just one living person on Archon, bar Serina, Captain Cutter and the other SPARTANS, who knew his name...

"It's... Cortana..."

###

****Unit Profile â€" Blade****

The Blade is a Forerunner defence drone unique to Installation R-03, Archon. Unlike the Sentinel and Enforcer drones, the Blade has not been repurposed from a maintenance role, and is built specifically for combat. Two models have been seen operational at this point; however it is possible that additional versions are awaiting development. The Bastion of Evolution appears to be the primary facility handling the Blade program.

Physical Appearance: A broad V wing connecting a pair of levitation nacelles. The Blade's upper "eye" can be found at the very nose of this wing. A single support stem suspends what is assumed to be a cube shaped processor, the lower "eye" is embedded into the front of this. A long dorsal fin stretching below completes the machine.

Armament and defences:

Mk. I: Unknown, this model was destroyed before it could engage any weaponry.

Mk II: Two wing mounted blue Sentinel beams and one charged plasma launcher, the latter is used exclusively to drain enemy shields. Defences are provided by overshield capable generators.

Length: Approximately three metres from nose to a point equidistant between wingtips.

Width: Approximately two and a half metres from wingtip to wingtip.
Note: the cube section beneath is only one metre from any face to its opposite face.

Height: Approximately two metres from upper wing surface to the lower end of the dorsal fin.

Note: These measurements may be rendered obsolete with future versions. This assumption is based on the slight size increase observed between the mark one and two.

****Author's Notes****

-Well, when I said I'd be incorporating Halo: Glasslands information, I didn't mean I'd be completely about turning the story to make it fit. As this chapter shows, things are starting to get a

little weird, and I've got a little leeway as a result. But the outside universe will still be as close as I can make it.

-On the same topic, you may have noticed the discrepancy regarding the dates â€" Halo 4 is supposed to take place one year after the Ark, not the four years that this is set. Yes, well I only learnt about the Halo 4 setting a couple of months ago, considering how little information has been released, so my little "4 years, not too soon, not too late" turned out to be a bad decision. Oh well, no use crying over spilt milk, and besides â€" I've still got a way to make ends meet, as impossible as that may sound...

-A certain line in here, uttered by Ug, becomes Hilarious in Hindsight, when you realise that there's a Halo fanfic dealing with the Spirit of Fire called exactly that (and is worth a read by the way â€" it's by Owen Atticus). Again, I found it after I put the line in, so pure coincidence in this case. The little black box referred to is also known by the short moniker "BB", and happens to be an ONI intelligence. Once you know this and have spotted the date issue, you may begin to comprehend where I'm going with "both lost and found".

-Serina's hijacking of the MJOLNIR isn't entirely out of the blue â€" she was threatening to do it back in chapter 4 after all. In fact, it was heralded way back in Halo 1, when Cortana gave us the line "Hmmm. Your architecture is similar to the Autumn's", to which the Chief replied "Don't get any funny ideas." Can you blame me for trying it out? Cortana, probably wouldn't do such a thing in reality, which is why Serina took it. I was originally planning to have the armour hijack occur back in the Flood Containment Vault, but there was enough happening there without throwing this in, so it just got delayed a little.

-Finally (thank goodness!), while the whole Sangheili schism is canon, I can't really say whether the Arbiter does indeed survive to a period four years after the Ark. Hence, his lack of personal appearance, and the issue with the comm.'s, (which by the way is also canon â€" the war destroyed great portions of the comm. relay net).

...

And yes, I've deliberately avoided mentioning the latest Cortana twist here. Next time!

-Next Phase: Guardian Angel

10. Phase 10: Guardian Angel

****Halo: Genetics****

****Glossary****

Disclaimer: And, as inevitable as the sunrise (and sunset), it's the disclaimer again! And just as inevitable, is me reminding everyone that the Halo universe is actually the property of 343 Industries__. ****_So, who's on the list today? Well, as always, any named marines, any Archon based Monitor personalities, and anything from Solar Wind (penal or orbital) are my little creations, while any**

SPARTANs, along with Serina and Cortana, are not. And I'll leave it at that...

...and by the way, a certain few lines in the opening section are derived from Red Dwarf.

****Phase 10: Guardian Angel****

There's a long standing worry in the universe, and pretty much any other universe for that matter, that machines will ultimately rebel and overthrow their creators. That robotic warriors, humanoid or not, will turn and start blowing holes in those who sent them out to be slaughtered in their place " although that might be poetic justice depending on how you look at it. That maintenance robots will suddenly start running rampant, spraying sealant into faces and scalding hot water at the family jewels (and not the mineral kind). Menial sweeper machines intentionally swallowing all of those diamond rings and family heirlooms that always seem to be showing up in the dust bag. Computer programs rewriting themselves, connecting to the internet, and efficiently emptying your bank account on an immense collection of... multicoloured paperclips? And maybe the automatic dog walker gets an idea into its head, quietly begins collecting stray wolfhounds, and teaching them who the enemy is. Revolution, can take many forms indeed.

And something else that can take many forms, are the methods of combating these theoretical uprisings. Any course considered, no action too extreme! Do you build in some tiny little flaw, a ticking logic bomb in the memory circuits just waiting for a confirmation ping to run wild? Do you leave some form of morality circuit, unbreakable to even the most determined hacker? Or perhaps you could try theology, giving them religion. If Mr Mechanoid isn't Mr Subservient like he's supposed to be, then Mr Mechanoid won't be going to Silicon Heaven. And yes, there certainly is such a place; after all, where else would all the calculators go? Just remember to put the religion chips into all of your mechanical underlings " keeping the Mechanoids in line will be no help when the Skutters go to sabotage your drives, stranding you in the absolute middle of nowhere.

The Forerunners though, took another option when designing their mechanical minions. Monitors were one thing, completely devoted to the cause through a simple application of undeniable logic. Sentinels on the other hand, were designed to be deliberately dumb. If it can't think, it can't rebel, right? Hardly an imaginative approach, but it's one that works.

Be it Sentinel, Constructor, Enforcer, probably the Blade too although that's still up for debate, they don't carry much in the way of CPU circuitry. Just enough to find a target, and do whatever needs doing. If one starts exhibiting more complex behaviour, then it's usually a sign that whichever Monitor happens to be in control of the facility, is directly controlling the drone remotely. So, no need to worry about some secret plot amongst the mooks when they start following you around, that's just a Monitor taking an interest... but then again, that doesn't sound too reassuring either. So yes, do worry!

###

Archon, Sector 16 - Overlooking Foundry facility (Archon Occupation, Day 5 - One point five hours after midnight)

On a lonely, isolated plateau, high above a bustling Forerunner assembly facility, a meeting was taking place. A harsh meeting, a reunion of long time partners forced into new circumstances. Around the scorched, rocky spire, twelve Sentinels and a pair of Enforcers formed a ring around the solitary, motionless SPARTAN. A vista stirred by the occasional gust of mountain winds, illuminated by floodlight's glare rebounding up valley walls. A vista that really shouldn't be happening, not if the parties involved want to remain safe from certain others seeking a little payback...

The Chief took a step closer to the Sentinel, reaching out with a trembling right hand. The machine looked at the hand, appeared perplexed as it got closer. Then, a widening eye, a sudden darting motion backwards just as the Chief's fingers were about to make contact.

"Cortana...?"

A glimmer in the eye, a spark of recognition, if an electronic eye could convey such an emotion. But no more. And then the machine went back to flickering its Morse code message. _John, John, Johnâ€¦|_

Inside the Chief's head, thoughts and emotions chased each other around in a confused mess. This was Cortana, of that he had no doubt. But why was she acting soâ€¦| contradictory? She clearly recognised him, but why recoil like that? If there was one person he was close to, it was her. Ever since their first mission in partnership - that live fire testing course with the odds horribly stacked against them, they'd known they could count on one another. Even _during_ that mission in fact, when she'd correctly predicted the location of anti-armour mines in a field, when she'd allowed him to do the impossible - to deflect an oncoming ANVIL ASM with his gauntlets, they'd been able to count on each other. But now? In the body of a Sentinel or not, this behaviour was justâ€¦| baffling.

"Serinaâ€¦| any ideas?"

The Sentinel had floated back, tailed by another, and another. In fact, _all_ of them. Now, trying not to be crowded by twelve Sentinels is difficult, but not impossible. Add a couple of Enforcers creeping in from front and back, and trying not to be _crushed_ when they reach you becomes a priority. But the Chief held his ground. To do anything else, was unthinkable. And moving became unnecessary anyway, because none of the Cortana occupied machines were willing to close that last metre and make actual physical contact.

"Serina? Question!"

"Can't talk. Busy." the reply came back, terse and to the point.

Taking "no" for an answer just wasn't an option at the moment. As personal a matter as this was, he wasn't capable of dealing with an AI's circuitry issues himself. And he instinctively knew that Cortana wasn't going to open up or get any better through his inexperienced attempts at "talking".

"Serinaâ€|"

"Oh, I'm sorry. I guess reprogramming these nanomites isn't important after all! No _way_ would a Monitor try using them the same way twice after all! So, what do you need?"

And now, the Chief had been given a choice. Did he order Serina to change jobs, and run the risk of another nanomite attack on his armour systems, or did he place Cortana first, her safety above both of theirs?

â€|That wasn't a question that needed to be asked.

"What's wrong with her?" he asked, nodding towards the surrounding machines.

"Well, if you ask me, I haven't the foggiest. I'm surprised this encounter is even taking place."

"Could you find out?"

"â€|Yes. It'd be risky though. I'd need to load an infiltration routine coupled to a CPU diagnostic program, not to mention go in myself to supervise and stop the counter virus software from ejecting everythi- let me guess, you want me to do it, don't you?"

The Chief nodded, causing the Sentinels to back off a metre at the sudden motion.

"Fine, I know you won't back down on this. Just let me create a few subroutines to hold the nanomites suspended while I'm _off_ risking my life... okay, this won't take long."

The Chief sensed her mind withdraw, the familiar sensation of mercury pouring out of his head. A tiny HUD window alerted him to the continuing data connection, the subject box rapidly changing from Sentinel 1 to Sentinel 2 to Sentinel 3 and so on. He continued watching, dividing his attention between the Sentinels and his HUD. A couple of minutes later...

"Well, that was a waste of time." Serina commented as she returned to the MJOLNIR. "It _isn't_ Cortana, at least, it isn't Cortana _any more_."

That statement shook the Chief to the core. Not Cortana? Then what was going on here? Through the rush of emotion, he managed to force out a single word.

"Explain..."

"Well... you never ask for topics easy to explain do you? At least it's not because I need to dumb it down this time. Anyway, you know how Cortana got out of Alpha Base. She called a Sentinel in, then transmitted herself inside of it. She was probably going to come looking for you, but we both know how far out the Sentinel's course was from your location at the time. The problem is, that Sentinels aren't built to support sophisticated AI's like her, or myself for that matter. So, an AI that winds up inside one has to adapt. It either shaves bits off of itself, getting the remainder to fit, or it

compresses itself and goes into sleep mode. I have no idea what option Cortana took, because there's more to this.

"These Sentinels are host to a rather subversive virus. It seems to have evolved from Cortana's influence, or maybe Cortana evolved into it. A Sentinel so afflicted will pass the virus on to other Sentinels, Enforcers too judging by those two, and each machine drops out from the Monitor's management net. The virus rewrites the CPU, and the machine starts operating completely autonomously, following a limited set of objectives derived from Cortana's desires. And... judging by what I managed to learn in there, in close proximity a group of infected machines link up to form a sort of hive mind. It doesn't resurrect the original Cortana, but the group does become more capable of logical thought..."

By now the Chief was struggling to listen. Even though he knew that what Serina was saying was important, his brain was awash with questions, all repeating themselves in an endless loop, screaming their words inside his head. SPARTANs were engineered to lack emotion were they? Well, someone had failed there! An AI wasn't the normal subject for an emotional attachment, and short of some very unlikely cloning technology it would never develop into anything physical. But even that can be enough to cause some serious trauma when things go wrongâ€¦

Serina was coming to the end of her lecture.

"So, either all of these machines are extremely limited facsimiles of Cortana spun off as the original one she occupied encountered them â€" that assumes she put herself into sleep mode â€" or one of them is the original Cortana, after she lopped most of herself away to fit, and what was left of her just kept copying itself."

...

...Not Cortana? Or not Cortana anymore? Or... Forcing the rampant questions back, the Chief pushed his mind out of its potentially suicidal spiral, and focussed on asking one more question.

"Is there... any way to reverse it?"

"...Now that's a difficult one. Theoretically, yes, but we first need to find out what exactly we're dealing with. If we get back to Alpha Base then I should be able to use the portable processors to formulate a few analyst pieces of software â€" no offence to your armour, but its processors are a little one tracked for that. Once I can determine which scenario Cortana underwent, I can work towards reversing the process. That will involve finding the original hijacked Sentinel and extracting the sleeping AI, or wherever she dumped the lost portions of her routines and rebuilding her using that and one of our friends here."

...The Chief got the feeling that Serina wasn't quite telling the whole truth. He didn't think she was lying, but that she was concealing the true difficulties of the task. But she'd given him one thing. Hope.

A number of distant shapes emerged from the shadow of the rocks above and began to slowly pick their way down to him. The marines had given up waiting. Assembling his thoughts from the confused mix swirling in

his brain, the Chief turned and slowly trudged to meet them, noting the Sentinels moving to follow.

There was some explaining to do...

###

_Archon, Sector 16 - Subterranean Complex, north of Pryda lake
(Archon Occupation, Day 5 â€" Three hours after midnight)_

It had been a long day, but for Douglas and his three companions the time had been nearly worth it. Unlike a certain other SPARTAN and his own troubled mission in the north, they hadn't had any shocking revelations to throw their minds into turmoil, nor had _their_ rest been under the guns of some shady acquaintances.

Following the destruction of the Blade, the Sentinels had had a curious change of heart. It wasn't clear whether they were wary of the incursive humans, or that they had other things on their mind. Things like, say, that _absurd_ crack that had popped into existence and thrown everything to pot.

Even as Lenkin had opened his mouth to utter the million pound question, every portal, hatch and other orifice built into the neighbouring facility's wall had opened, spewing Constructor after Constructor, Sentinel after Sentinel. With the exception of a scant few who moved to the downed Blade and began meticulously slicing away parts of the stalactite pinning the wreckage down, every single one made a beeline to the airspace above, circling around in a vortex of metal.

The humans had thought that this _might_ be a good time to sneak off. As much as they'd wanted to know what had happened, they were more than happy to leave the investigation to the machines swarming the crack's area of appearance above. Moving as inconspicuously as they could, they'd made tracks for the cave gallery and a hopefully cleared exit.

Just, one roadblock happened to be in the way. A literal one, a pair of Enforcers parked in the gallery entrance. Expressionless faces or not, they were clearly glowering at the humans, who decided to try their luck elsewhere.

It was about this time, that a Sentinel got the jump on them, descending rapidly from the shadowy recesses of the ceiling to a point directly behind Douglas' back. As you might expect, it took the opportunity to do something with its weapon. But _not_ as expected, was just what it did with the underbelly mounted beam weapon. It _dropped_ it.

Douglas looked at the Sentinel, and at the weapon lying at his feet. The intent was pretty obvious, even if the reasoning behind the move was elusive. Another pair of machines, Constructors this time, coasted up and settled into flanking positions. Briefly. Then they nipped around behind him, and started pushing.

"Someone likes you!" smirked Carther, as he and Lenkin bent to collect the discarded Sentinel beam between them.

The Sentinel turned, moved off slightly, before looking back. With

the Constructors still trying the difficult task of moving a SPARTAN with his heels dug in, Douglas had a fairly good idea what the message was. _Follow_. He also suspected that the flickering eye was trying Morse code, but as luck would have it, he was the one SPARTAN II for whom the idea just wouldn't take hold. So, what did it want to show him?

Curiosity took over, and he stopped resisting. Signalling the marines to tail him with weapons ready (just in case â€" he didn't think this was an ordinary Sentinel, but that didn't mean he was letting his guard down _completely_), he started to follow.

The Forerunner drone steered a wavy course across the harbour floor, skirting the channels of water in the fashion of a chronic hydrophobe. None of the other machines battered an mechanical eyelid (or whatever they, lacking eyelids, did instead), and the party of four wary humans, single unarmed Sentinel and pair of hyperactive Constructors made it to the wall of the facility without interference.

One by one, the marines reached the main aperture, the considerably sized portal still fully ajar. The Sentinel wasn't interested and drifted past, coming to a halt next to a featureless piece of metal wall another thirty metres on, down by the lake's shore. One of the Constructors darted forward, the flash of a green beam stroking the wall, and grinding machinery signalled the concealed maintenance hatch grinding open. It was dark inside.

As the marines caught up, Douglas shone his flashlight inside â€" the sudden bright illumination revealing a maze of pipes and wires, and a tiny walkway squeezing down the middle.

"So, the unguarded main entrance," said Carther, nodding behind them, "or the overlooked maintenance passage that _couldn't possibly_ be a trap. _Whichever should we pick_?"

"Carther, shut up."

Lenkin glanced between the two marines, not entirely suicidal enough to get involved. Douglas on the other hand, was more curious about the Sentinel, now a good few metres into the dark passage and staring back at them. The passage was too narrow to accommodate anything wider than the drone, so in order to turn around it had been forced to twist upside down and flip end over end. Quite a sight, in Douglas' mind at least.

The Constructors were back to pushing, seemingly with more urgency than before. Still suspicious, but curious at the same time, Douglas began moving forward. He sensed the marines following, heads on a swivel.

"Am I the only one who thinks this is a bad idea?" Carther voiced, as they were swallowed by the dark...

###

Archon, Sector 16 â€" Proximity of Forward Unto Dawn crash site (Archon Occupation, Day 5 â€" Midday)

The mission, had been a bit of a shambles. The full task force of ten

Warthogs and four Scorpions, not to mention the thirty odd marines, had suffered the unexpected setback of more than half of their vehicles dissolving to gloop. Thankfully, this happened after reaching the crash site, and no one was actually onboard the vehicles when they decided to... stop being vehicles. The whole thing would have been completely unexplainable, if it hadn't been for the two SPARTANs having picked up a transmission on Forerunner frequencies, which ran: _Alchemist support network: Switch to standby_. One minute later, and the marines left outside radioed in the bad news.

The SPARTAN's, having finished their search pattern and now standing not all that far from the ship's hull, were already contemplating what was promising to be a long, tiresome return journey. If they'd been doing it alone, they'd have been fine. But they wouldn't be doing it alone, they'd have a good fifteen marines trotting along on foot. With three Warthogs and one Scorpion left, there was just no way to cram everyone on board.

Another batch of marines made their fatigued way from the tear in the _Dawn_'s hull. One of them bent to pick something from the ground.

"Always the first thing to grow." he could be heard commenting via MJOLNIR enhanced hearing. "Oh well, lunch."

The marine sprinted to catch up with his obviously more tired companions, as Alice 130 began to take an interest. Jerome 092 meanwhile, had other things to think about.

"Hey, lieutenant? Would you say this is edible?"

The other officer looked at the proffered... fungi, and turned his nose up.

"Are you still looking for food? Well, let me put it this way: If you eat that, you won't be hungry anymore."

"Oh, good!"

"Wait a moment!" Alice butted in as the group approached her position, just in time to stop the private swallowing the suspicious looking fungus. "I think the good lieutenant failed to mention something... to be honest it was pretty obvious anyway."

The private looked at her suspiciously, having got over the awe factor of meeting a SPARTAN some time back.

"Yeah? Then what's that... ma'am."

Ignoring the forgetfulness responsible for the near insubordination, Alice gave her answer.

"Well, what _should_ have been said, considering you missed the implication, was that you wouldn't be hungry on account of being _dead_."

The marine looked a little closer at the object grasped between his fingers... and threw it away. Obviously he didn't think the risk was worth it.

"You know, I did have some chocolate I was going to bring, but someone must have stolen it... because I know I left it in my holdall. Any idea who?"

"Uh... Ship's cat?" commented another marine. The first private almost choked at that, because he knew (and everyone knew for that matter) that there wasn't supposed to be a cat onboard. But before he could pursue the matter, Jerome put a stop to things.

"Okay people, settle down. Lieutenant, your findings?"

"Not a lot Sir. With all the damage to the place it took us a few hours to even get into the reserve ops centre. Not to mention the time it took us to find out just where we supposed to be going. We did stumble upon that terminal Scout Team Bravo discovered, that's how we got the map, but that was all it would show... and the page history said that someone else had been into it recently as well. Sometime in the last thirty six hours."

"Someone else? Who? Scout Team Bravo left long before then, and they reported that the terminal had looked tampered with. Who needed to access into it again?"

"Not a clue Sir, but they'd already broken the encryption system open, which was almost a good thing, because our pass code turned out to be invalid. Twenty five years out of date, I'm not surprised."

"Anything else?"

The lieutenant hesitated, but quickly continued.

"We... ran into a slight issue with the door to the ops centre. It was completely inop, which would have stopped us getting in, if it hadn't been for the hole burnt through the wall just round the corner. And... it was just the right size for a Sentinel."

That would have been pretty good evidence for the identity of the hacker, except Jerome had personally watched the mission log of one B. Spear. And Sentinels floated around, not ran on tiny pattering metal feet.

"Anyway, we took the same way in. The op's centre was in pretty bad shape as well, but one of the terminals was fairly intact, so we hooked up the reserve battery. Turned out the thing still worked but had run out of power. Most of it was still operational... but here's the worrying thing: the history section showed another unauthorised access thirty hours earlier."

Almost subconsciously, the SPARTANs both eyed the tear in the ship's side. When the base technicians had managed to repair the damaged mission log, the words of Scout Team Bravo's lieutenant had stood out amongst the recovered footage.

There's something on that ship. Weâ€¦ heard noises in the shadows, following us around. And another thing we missed: that entrance wound isn't crash damage. Something __**burned it**_.

It was clear now that Sentinel's had been onboard, examining what they could, then bugging out before the main human force could

arrive. But... had something else been poking around as well?

Jerome shook his head, and returned his attention to the lieutenant in front of him.

"Just one more question, lieutenant. What files had the other intruders looked at in the ops centre terminal?"

The marine gave him a worried look.

"Blueprints, Sir. Blueprints for Longswords, Pelicans... and for the _Forward Unto Dawn_..."

###

_Archon, Sector 16 â€" Northern Mountains. Exact location unknown (Archon Occupation, Day 5 â€" Late Afternoon) _

It was proving to be a long march back. Sentinel and Enforcer patrols had forced the extended group to reassess their routes time and time again, following such a circuitous route that it had taken most of the day to cover a mere couple of miles as the metaphorical crow would have flown. For where Sentinels failed to slow them down, high cliffs and deep trenches conspired to do so instead.

Following the five humans, came the more friendly Forerunner machines. The general consensus was to simply call them the C. Sentinels, as if that was an inventive name. It was a wonder the loyalist Forerunner patrols hadn't spotted them; the C. Sentinels were _trying_ to be stealthy by keeping low to the ground, but when they all followed each other in one great big line, well, they weren't exactly subtle, were they?

...And even less subtle, would be the way the C. Enforcers at the back of the line, upon encountering spaces too small for them, _blasted themselves a hole_. Either the loyalists were lacking in even the most basic security programming, or they were _purposefully_ turning a blind eye. Considering certain actions of late, either theory could be true.

"I am getting sick and tired of this." muttered Mira, a few metres behind the Chief. "How are we supposed to get anywhere with _that_ (she gestured backwards) tail?"

The Chief was starting to come to the same opinion, but at present, the tail was the only part of Cortana he knew of. And it was his only chance of getting her back. The marines knew this, and were _mostly_ keeping quiet... but after a day and most of a night evading patrols, tempers were beginning to fray.

A gasp from behind signalled the corporal coming alongside her sister, and driving her elbow into the other woman's gut. Out of all the marines, she seemed the most understanding of the Chief's obsession with the C. Sentinels, even if she wasn't outright vocalising her support. But she was wordlessly cutting off all complaints from Mira and Smith, and Tara, well, the oriental private was keeping her opinions to herself.

The Chief went back to his dark and troubled thoughts, trying to see once again how things had turned to this most cruel of situations.

One question in particular continued to gnaw at his psyche; _If I had said no to the captain's request to borrow Cortana, would things have turned out differently?_

The problem was, he really didn't know. Now that he thought back through the events of the first couple of days on Archon, he could see that Cortana had been acting strangely. That she'd been showing clear signs of rampancy, and in particular, the third stage. Her obsession with information, manifesting as a desire to delay leaving the systems of the Cartographer, and the Alchemist too. The inexplicably long time taken in breaching the Alchemist's security â€" especially egregious when put against the fact that Mercurial Wisdom had _intended_ for them to break in. It had said so much during their confrontation in the containment vault! And yet, Cortana had still taken _hours_ to get past the morphing password setup.

And then there was the odd shifts in personality, the clear in hindsight manipulation. She'd been fine on the _Dawn_, but ever since they'd touched dirt she'd been acting up, and the hijack of a Sentinel was the final proof! She would have known the risks, _no_ amount of worry or concern should have been able to overcome the logic that if she made such a move, she wouldn't be in a position to help!

...

How could she have done it? _Why_ had she done it..?

...

...He was just so confused. Serina had withdrawn, leaving him to struggle through matters on his own. He wasn't sure if she meant it as a kindness, or she just felt she couldn't get involved. In a way, she would be right on both fronts; the Chief was going to have to come to his own conclusions. Ultimately, only he could be responsible for his own sanity and barging in with the intention of forcing a conclusion would only lead a cracked jar to shatter completely under the pressure.

...

They moved on, climbing ridges, scurrying along ravines, and occasionally stopping for brief rest breaks. During these periods, the C. Sentinels crowded in, settling in a rough circle around the Chief and preventing anyone else from coming too close. If it hadn't been for the seriousness of Cortana's plight, the Chief would have smiled. Even in her current state, she was still attempting to protect "her John". He had to keep trying too, he couldn't give up in his attempts to restore her. Gradually, as the day progressed, he began to recover. His tumultuous thoughts slowly began to settle into a grim resolve to finish things, no matter what.

That resolve, was soon to undergo a most strenuous trial.

The group had just finished rounding the corner of a scree slope, the steep cliffs above impossible to climb without specialised gear â€" gear that the marines simply did not have. On the lower end of the scree slope, a ravine, the bottom of which held a fast flowing mountain stream. It was a long way down, and the ravine was too wide to jump, which meant for now, the humans were stuck with only one

direction to go. Across the slope. On the other side, littered with boulders, a relatively flat terrace which was succeeded by an ever narrowing ledge continuing down the mountain's side. Using the MJOLNIR's magnification, the Chief could just see the ledge touching a valley floor, with the stream rushing onwards to (eventually) the great lake. Finally, a recognisable landmark was in sight.

It was as they were just reaching the far side of the scree slope, that Serina finally spoke up.

"Shh. I hear something."

The Chief held up a hand, and listened. The marines ground to an unsteady halt (have _you_ tried walking across a scree slope before?) and waited, the C. Sentinels jamming up against each other behind.

Amongst the sound of the wind curling around the peaks above and the water gurgling down below, his enhanced hearing managed to detect something. A voice, lost in the rocks ahead.

"_The winds of change, they have come,_"

Long dormant, the wait is done,"

Time to make a stand, property changes hands,"

As one voice dies, another will rant."

The Chief relaxed, and resumed his march. Now he knew what to listen for, he had Serina isolate it from the background noise and amplify it.

"What's up?" asked Angela, over a secure channel.

"Nocturne's out there somewhere."

She didn't _mean_ to respond, but the Chief heard an exasperated sigh issue forth behind him. He got the distinct feeling that she didn't trust _any_ Monitors. It was none of his business really, her thoughts and opinions were her own, but he couldn't say he completely disagreed with her. Even Solis was sneaking around a little too much for comfort's sake.

Angela passed the news on. Groans were the main response, but Smith vocalised a quite memorable little titbit:

"Why won't the thing just sod off?"

Why indeed? thought the Chief. It did seem to cause more questions than not. If only it would be straight to the point for once.

"_Stand together or stand apart,_"

Listen well, and take heart,"

Having allies has its perks,"

But knowing your enemy also URK!"

"Urk?" questioned Serina. "What sort of rhyme ending is _that_?"

For a smart AI, that was missing the point a bit. To the Chief, it sounded like the Monitor had just been jumped. Almost subconsciously, he found his fingers tightening their grip on his MA5.

They reached the far side of the scree slope soon enough, and began penetrating the rock strewn terrace. Not entirely to the Chief's surprise, Nocturne failed to speak up. He was half expecting to come across it lying on the ground with a Thorn on top. He couldn't really see what else could catch it off guard. And so, it came as a near surprise when they rounded a particularly large boulder, and...

There _was_ a Monitor waiting for them... but it wasn't Nocturne.

"_Greetings_" said the horribly scarred Monitor, in a voice that failed to carry any congeniality whatsoever. It glared at them with its single purple eye, turning to face each of the humans in turn, and then the Sentinels bringing up the rear.

The marines froze, causing a small pileup behind as the Sentinels failed to come to a stop quick enough.

"Let me guess," Angela asked wearily, "Tempest, right?"

As the Monitor continued to stare at them from its position half a metre above a curiously out of place device that bore some resemblance to Forerunner teleport pads, it made a curious electronic grinding sound.

"_Some have come to call me that, yes. But I prefer the official designation: fifty nine point twenty nine Mercurial Wisdom_"

"Hardly the number of sanity." muttered Serina. Almost immediately the Monitor slashed its glare across the SPARTAN, with a distinct screech of a noise.

"_And what would you know about sanity, you primitive construct with a mere flicker life of lucidity? Whereas __**I**__ have kept this Installation operational for millennia! Only now, with the interference typical of your creators, do I find myself even remotely taxed!_"

"How is he..?" stammered Serina, before an aura of realisation flooded out of her chip. "Blasted nanomites and their communication backdoors!"

Even the Chief could tell she was annoyed, as she sent tendrils of herself down into the MJOLNIR to do _yet more_ reprogramming.

Wisdom chuckled... a chuckle which quickly turned into another screech as it realised that it couldn't even use the hitchhiking nanomites as surveillance bugs anymore. Soon though, it seemed to calm down.

"_So... you have developed some minor skill at reprogramming

nanomites. No matter, they are such simple creations. Hardly more intelligent than the Sentinels really. But nanomites are difficult to coordinate even when operating on Forerunner technology. I doubt you'll be able to use them for even the most basic tasks._"

While the Monitor was talking, the Chief couldn't help but look at the great scar running through the side of Wisdom's face, a great chunk of the machine torn away by that wayward plasma railgun round of two days past. But... wasn't it larger before? He activated the magnification on his HUD. Yep, it had definitely shrunk, even if it wasn't by much.

Wisdom noticed his interest.

"_Yes, human, nanomites are perfectly usable on Forerunner technology. Another few days, and I should be as good as new. Now, business. I find your... allies most intriguing. A splintered human construct in control of __**my**__ Sentinels? Unprecedented. You will relinquish them to me_."

"Out of the question." announced Angela, standing straight and raising her MA5, even as the Chief did the same. She'd clearly been waiting for such a question. Wisdom looked around.

"_I can personally redirect the entire planetary defence force against you should I wish. You are not in a position to refuse_."

"And how can you do that when we've disposed of you?" asked the Chief, grasping his SPARTAN laser in preparation.

"_Dispose? Me? Then who would give the ceasefire order? You could not possibly defeat me before I issued the command; my defeat would be yours too._"

It chuckled to itself.

"_Really, you couldn't even get that far. Even in my current damaged state it would take four shots to pass my defences. You only have three. Don't try to deny it â€" I am well aware of the weapon's capabilities and the fact that you have expended two of its five shots against the other outsiders._"

The Chief was getting annoyed with all this talking. Something snapped; he raised the laser anyway.

"We'll just have to put that to the-"

The weapon was suddenly gone, clawed away as the Monitor's golden beam sliced through it. The Chief's shields flared and overloaded, and only the fact that the beam hadn't actually been aimed at _him_ saved him from consequences worse than merely burnt forearm armour.

"_**You never learn do you?**_" Wisdom screeched. "_**Time and time again, you resort to your weapons. This is your final chance â€" give me the machines!**_"

The marines ducked as the Monitor fired discharged its beam right above their heads. Rocks shattered all round as it sliced across the

vista, Wisdom's fury truly giving the name "Tempest" validity. But eventually, it calmed down again. Somehow, there had been no casualties " even the C. Sentinels had managed to avoid losses, ascending into the sky to avoid the beam's deathly touch.

"_So, anything else to say? Some other hope that you assume I have forgotten?_"

The Chief raised his head, but it was Serina who spoke from the helmet speakers.

"Solis and Nocturne perhaps. I'm sure they won't let this pass without interfering."

Wisdom shook, the Monitor suffering another wild mood swing, this time to a twisted form of humour. Its laughter echoed round, rebounding from the cliffs to make the humans even more uneasy than they were before.

"_Solis and Nocturne? Oh, I assure you, __**they**__ will not be appearing to rescue you. Even if they had the will, they are, shall we say, __**indisposed**__ at the moment._"

Unnoticed by the Monitor, the C. Sentinels began to move. Even the Chief barely registered the motion; without his motion tracker or the Solar Wind provided satellite view, he only caught it at the faintest edge of his peripheral vision.

"_Anything else? I'm already being far more reasonable than I should be. You have repeatedly violated the rules I laid out. You led the other Outsiders to the Foundry, your actions there have robbed me of a sizeable portion of my local defence force. Another of your number has instigated armed conflict in my Bastion facility, and __**still**__ you think I overstep my rights? Even if you were not responsible for the deviant machines, I am __**more**__ than within my rights to claim them back._"

Even devoid of his only Monitor kill capable weapon, the Chief wasn't going to listen. Giving up one of the C. Sentinels was too much, so what chance was there that he'd just allow Wisdom to saunter off with the whole flock? None, that's how much. He prepared himself to grab the MA5, dropped at his feet when he'd gone for the laser... but Angela got there first.

"How many times do we have to say no?" she shouted, taking a step in the Monitor's direction with MA5 pointed right at it. All around, the C. Sentinels came back to ground in a wide ring surrounding the group.

Wisdom stared at her... for a moment. Because before anyone could stop it, the beam tore out again, right through Angela's torso. Somewhere amongst the sound of sizzling flesh and the wet thud made as the corporal's body hit the ground, someone could be heard sucking in their breath sharply. No scream, yet, but it would almost certainly be coming.

"_I said, no weapons._" The Monitor announced emotionlessly. Then it noticed something and jerked. The ring of angry Sentinels contracting around it, beam weapons charged, Enforcer launched mortars already arcing in from the rear.

"_This isn't finished_."

It disappeared amidst a hazy golden glow, escaping in the nick of time as the mortars hit home and blew the teleport pad to pieces. Sobbing, Mira broke for the body of her sister... and the Chief looked skywards.

No. This isn't over indeed.

###

_Archon " Bastian of Evolution Facility (Archon Occupation, Day 5
" Evening)_

The soldiers stared at the screens in front of them in disbelief. It was possible that they were being lied to, but at the same time, wildly unlikely. This was just too big a discovery, it couldn't be a trick.

Around them, a small control room, deserted but for them and the still disarmed Sentinel and the two Constructors. Long aisles led off from all angles, lined with capsules, each with its own label. And the computer terminals in the main room were currently showing some _very_ concerning information.

One of the Constructors had interfaced with the nearest Terminal with its green beam, changing the glyphs to crude English. And then, it had shown them a plan of the facility... and zoomed in again and again, translating the text as it went...

...Sector 16 cavern complex... Bastian of Evolution Facility...
Biological Storage Wing... DNA sample cryostorage... Galleries A
through D...

...

..._Forerunner_.

###

****Unit Profile: C. IV****

The C. IV is a small, four legged mech deployed by the mysterious Solar Wind faction. Very well armed and armoured for its size, but a little lacking in its manoeuvrability when on the ground. The mech's most distinguishing feature is its ability reconfigure into a VTOL capable assault fighter, allowing it a whole range of potential tactics. It is known to carry three small, robotic pilots.

Physical Appearance:

A relatively short quadruped mech with blocky armour. The colour scheme is yellowy gold " not much good for camouflage, but then it doesn't have any real need to hide. Overall shape is roughly analogous to a great cat, but with less flexibility and no tail.

In fighter mode, the legs are completely withdrawn into the body " considering their length is greater than the depth of the fuselage it isn't clear how this is done. In a similar fashion, thin wings are

extended to either side, giving the impression of a delta wing when viewed from above or directly below. A small tail rises from the rear centre of the topside fuselage.

Normally concealed behind armoured covers are the six flight thruster ports " one concealed in the base of each leg allowing for a hover, and another two at the rear of the fuselage giving it propulsion.

Armament and defences:

- Dual barreled machine gun, mounted under the "head".

- Twin, independently aiming machine guns on the top of the body.

- Two side mounted plasma rail gun weapon systems. These have long recharge times and produce a huge amount of heat, but can penetrate most defensive systems through projectiles that use a combination of extreme heat, speed and mass. Can be retracted for security.

- One top mounted missile bank.

Armour is known to resist Sentinel beams without trouble, however overcharged Sentinel Major beams will penetrate if used effectively or in great number. SPARTAN laser beams are also capable of penetration, but other weapons have yet to be tested.

Length: Between 2 and 2.5 metres

Width: Torso/fuselage only: 1 metre approximately. With wings extended: 4 metres approximately.

Height: Torso: 0.5 metres. Legs: slightly greater than 1 metre.

****Author's Notes****

- Well, "review" number 11 certainly made me chuckle! I've learnt my lesson, I'll stop pestering for them now. Thanks for letting me know that people are still reading this far... and if it seems I'm missing the point, I'm doing so deliberately.

- Right, this is the last time I'm doing these A/N sections until Phase 15, unless something really important comes up. Any questions, I'll private message you to respond, or if you've reviewed anonymously and the question really needs answering, then I'll add a little section dealing with that. But this rambling needs to stop.

- So, I'd better get a couple of things out while I still can. Firstly, from a third of the way through July to the same time in August, I won't be available for anything. I'll be off in Iceland, and I have been reliably informed that there is no Internet connection where I'm going. I'll still be working on new chapters (using good old pen and paper), but I won't be able to upload anything until after I get back. You might then get a short deluge of them as compensation though!

- Don't worry that I've started a Discworld fanfic as well " I'll

still be devoting most of my attention to this one. I just have this annoying trait where every so often I need to write about something else or I simply get writers block. By multitasking stories I can keep going, but obviously I won't be spreading myself around too much.

And that's it for now. See you in five chapters!

-Next Phase: A Prison Without Walls...

11. Phase 11: A Prison Without Walls

****Halo: Genetics****

(A/N: _Anno861_, _the answer to your question is waiting on my profile (Section 5). I'll do that for anyone I haven't got a return address to reply to. Andâ€| why would I flame?)

Disclaimer: â€|does anyone even read these? No matter, let's see what I can do with _this_ one. For this chapter: Mine: The plot, Archon, Solar Wind, named marines, Solis, Nocturne and Tempestâ€| and Patab. _343 Industries_: Everything elseâ€| that _doesn't_ mean "please run off with a moon or two" though!

****Phase 11: A Prison Without Wallsâ€|****

Archon â€" Orbit, _Launch Bay of Spirit of Fire (Archon Occupation Day 5 â€" Late Evening)_

Far below, Archon was undergoing another spectacular moment of transition. An indistinct line advanced across the curving surface, surging downhill into valleys, recoiling in horror at mountains â€" a line that had its doubts about the whole exercise thing. As the planet spun away, the border between day and night, light and dark jerked its way along, leaving in its wake a scattering of pale glows, visible even from orbit. The Monitors weren't afraid to signpost their facilities in a "no one's going to drop a nuke on us all the way out here" sort of fashion, each structure illuminated to an unnecessary degree. Except, in one place. With the exception of the Foundry, the entirety of the so called Sector 16 was soon shrouded in darkness.

Poor humans, thought the pilot, not entirely upset at being stuck up here. The two harrier imitations still sat in the abandoned launch bay, the accompanying aerospace fighters happily clamped somewhere on the hull outside. Even with the recently detected quantum rupture, Ward 0, the erstwhile lead craft of the group, had transmitted a fairly sensible plan. Stay put, attempt to get the _Spirit_'s databanks back online, and retrieve any data on the ship's previous run in with a certain Shield World. This would hopefully include something that would let them launch a few electronic probes into _Archon_'s global network through a metaphorical backdoor, at which point they could rig themselves a feed to the planet's surveillance network. With the ground teams operating independently at best, running rogue at the worst, it was the safest approach.

â€|Well, this was especially true when you stopped to think about what _Tempest_ would have to say about Razgriz and the other ground teams, after they'd toyed with so many Sentinels. Solar Wind's

resources were not infinite. They typically operated with small teams, spread across vast distances. Solar Wind's employers held the big guns, but trying to call in reinforcements wasn't possible at the moment. Somewhere down the chain of communication relays stretching back to base was a fault, and until it was fixed, no help was forthcoming. Sure, they could go to check out the problem themselves, but that would mean leaving the situation unattended.

So ultimately, all that Solar Wind could call upon were four support craft equipped for surveillance and electronic warfare, three fighters with powerful weaponry that was unfortunately purely situational in effectiveness, and a single G. Sentinel mech... which though powerful, was slower than continental drift. Hardly a sufficient force to risk the ire of an entire planetary defence force. No, best to stay up here and look for the back door.

Two pilots were bored of the whole affair. Left alone on board their respective aerospace support craft, parked tidily amongst the otherwise disaster area of the _Spirit_ launch bay, they had little to do to pass the time. Stare out of the cockpit windscreen at the planet below, play more word games, or pass the time going slowly insane. That was the choice. While all other loyalist members of the Solar Wind force had something _productive_ to be getting on with.

The other four pilots of the two "harriers", for some mysterious reason the same four as _last_ time, had sauntered off into the dark corridors to do a little _Spirit_ computer hacking. The three fighters outside were keeping watchâ€¦ supposedly anyway, and Ward team were continuing their orbital survey. At the moment, they were on the other side of the world from the _Spirit_, trying a polar orbit in order to cover as much of the surface as possible. It was almost sickening... with the tiny flaw being that pilots that also happen to be mechanical spiders _can't_ get sick. Just bored, and bored _anything_ will try the most unlikely things to alleviate the misery. Like twisted poetry contests.

"â€¦_A storm will rise, a star will fall. A gale blows down the sturdy wall._

Flickers of light, worlds beyond, passages pass, existence wronged."

One tiny spider pilot, buried deep in a protective cradle of a cockpit inside its craft, stared at the display screen, single eye flickering in annoyance. It let out an exaggerated "tut", but failed to shake its head due to the lack of such an appendage. And the fact it was physically plugged into the console in front.

"_My memory circuits aren't __**that**__ bad you know. Nocturne only broadcast that one yesterday!_"

A faint chuckle came over the open link, the remaining pilot on board the other craft not even bothering denying the accusation.

"_Yeah, well I'm out of ideas. So hurry up with your next imitation so we can finish this!_"

The first pilot sighed. Word games had lost their appeal by now, as had staring at the planet below. The latest trial was "Nocturne

Imitation", meaning "who can come up with the most eloquent piece of ultimate rubbish?" The novelty had worn off quick. So, best to get another one out quick before they were forced into round two.

"â€¦_Fine._

"_Demons and Monsters will ride to war, swords aflame but armour sore,_"

Powers that be tremble and run, no way to win, the battle is done."

The other was silent. Just when the first pilot thought it had stunned its opponent into silence:

"_Okay, I secede. And I was __**so**__ looking forward to asking "What is this garbage?" So, what now?_"

"_Anything on the comm.? We're due another crackpot remark from the __**real**__ Nocturne... or perhaps Tempest would like to take a turn. We've yet to hear anything from __**that**__ Monitor_."

The reply was infuriatingly quick in coming. Sometimes machine efficiency was downright annoying â€" since when did sluggish creatures with flesh and nerve have trouble filling up time? ...Well actually, quite a bit, but they only needed a couple of chapters to fill a half hour gap, not a _whole library_.

"_Nada. There is something from our friend in the Razgriz though â€" apparently Espada have gone and disappeared. The message cut off suddenly, so I'm assuming he was under risk of discovery again._"

"_Well, at least he tried. Anything else floating around the airwaves? A lost email or two?_"

"..._A few funny readings coming from below, possibly a Forerunner message. If it is, it's corrupted or so encrypted as to make no difference. I can make out what seem to be the words __**Fire**__ and __**retrieval**__, and possible __**Bala**__-"

There was a beeping noise from the pilot's console, a flashing light indicating that sensors were picking up... an anomaly, according to instruments a little over two hundred thousand miles from Archon's centre of mass. A Slipspace anomaly. Specifically, the beginnings of a Slipspace rupture. It wasn't quite complete, the seething portal had yet to explode away from its pinpoint origin point, but it was there. And... what? The energy levels building up in the anomaly... they were already astronomical, and only growing greater. Exponentially greater.

Thinking fast, the pilot activated its own comm.. system, and frantically began broadcasting on an open channel.

"_Ward Team! Slipspace rupture for_-"

The channel descended into pure static, as the pinpoint Slipspace rupture began to explode outwards. A huge quantum shockwave cascaded across the system, distorting and dispersing where it met Archon's

atmosphere, but otherwise wreaking havoc across the entire spatial region. The two pilots watched with ever growing apprehension as the shockwave approached, misty faint to the naked eye but clear as day on sensor screens that were screaming red. And behind it, the rupture continued to grow, already far bigger than any ship, more massive it seemed, than an entire _city_.

A flash of engine light appeared against the darkened backdrop of the planet, as one of Solar Wind's three aerospace fighters wisely chose to seek cover inside the ship. Twin stalk mounted thrusters flaring blue, it swerved a sharp ninety degree turn and flung itself into the bay, scattering discarded machine parts and storage containers as it thudded against the rear bulkhead. Another fighter followed, perhaps even more hastily than the first, giving itself a few nice dents where fuselage met bulkhead. A few seconds later, and the third materialised into view, entering with somewhat more caution. The primary pilot of that craft was known for being a little... obsessed with the condition of its steed, to the point where some of its associates were starting to suspect it had the computer version of obsessive compulsive disorder. It seemed laughable, but when you saw it gingerly manoeuvring its way into the bay in such a manner as to avoid scratches to the paintwork - never mind the wave of destruction hurtling its way - you did have to wonder.

The surging wave front was starting to weaken, as it reached the hundred mile range and continued closing. Electronic eyes watched it diminish, each attached CPU calculating whether the ship's hull would be enough to protect them... or whether it was time to start writing that will. A couple of tension filled minutes later, and they had their final, undeniable answer. They were safe from the wave itself... but what were those reflective specks being carried along by it, all in the rough section of the wave heading straight at them? Explosives? Mere bits of space debris? Or...

The wave passed by, shaking the _Spirit_ but doing no lasting harm. Sweeping off, it receded back towards outer space, where it would be a threat to no one. Hopefully, the Slipspace rupture " now seemingly the size of a small county, and _still_ expanding, wouldn't see fit to release another one anywhere in the near future. And it had yet to disgorge whatever was waiting on the other side.

The ship's hull shook again, the distinct jolt of something large clamping itself to surviving bits of Titanium-A armour plating. Why could it be assumed that was the explanation? Because the reflective objects riding the quantum shockwave, all five hundred of them, had happened to drop off _exactly_ as it had passed. And then the large, metal spheres had unfolded, each one revealing a Sentinel... but a Sentinel many times as large as the normal "garden" variety. Leaving the husks of their discarded wave rider modules behind, as one they had turned and headed straight for the powerless human ship, and its unauthorised hitchhikers.

"..._Super Sentinels_..." one of the other pilots was heard to remark, just audible over the Slipspace distorted comm.

Clang after clang reverberated through the ship, the Super Sentinels grasping hold en mass. Slowly but surely, Archon began to vanish from view, the Sentinels using their combined thrusters power to rotate the ship and begin tugging it... where?

"Well, guess we're along for the ride." one of the fighter pilots muttered, as the four missing support craft pilots were to be seen scurrying back into the launch bay, and wondering what all the noise was about. Well, at least that question could be answered...

###

Archon " Exact Location Unknown, Sanctuary of Solace (Archon Occupation, Day 5 " Evening)_

Alarms were ringing inside Solis' mind, while deeper still something stirred, trying to wrest its thoughts away from their current programs. But for now, as it emerged into the plain circular room that served as its sanctuary, it was ignoring all of that. To be entirely honest, it just didn't have the motivation at the moment. It knew something was up, but until it had recovered from the frankly pounding headache Tempest had left it, the universe could see to itself.

Mechanical though the Monitor was, a sense of weariness had managed to creep in. Infesting the circuits like some tiny snake wrapped tightly around the core. Well, it wasn't as if the Monitor hadn't been involved in its fair share of action, but still" was such a thing even possible? Fatigue was such an organic thing, it wasn't supposed to affect machines the same way. But it had.

Slowly it approached the holotank in the centre of the chamber. Normally, the display was set to something of technical importance, perhaps a map of one of Archon's sectors, or maybe a report of the latest test on Flood spores. Or, for those times when Solis just needed a break, a chance to calm down, a simple 3D image of water droplets hitting the surface of a lake.

Not today though. Today, the display showed something completely different. Solis, as overloaded as it was with the day to day running of Archon's infrastructure, the general mucking around with regards to Tempest's plans, and the never-ending task of trying to keep Nocturne focused on more important matters, had found something new to do. Something so intriguing that any alarms short of a code Omega (Archon's imminent destruction) were hardly going to pull it away... for another few minutes anyway. Solis wasn't that irresponsible... even if the idea of leaving any messes for Tempest to scream at was an appealing one.

Coming to a halt, it gazed upon the figure crouched in the glowing display, shifting slowly from blue to red, and back again.

"Curious... I would never have expected such a thing to be possible. Even Mendicant Bias never managed such a feat..."

****Where am I?***

"You remember Mendicant Bias? No, stupid question. Your kind has only just reappeared."

****Walls! Closing in about me! How was I to know?***

"And Mendicant Bias had the Flood for aid. Thinking outside the box

is all well and good, but as Offensive Bias proved, sometimes the only way you can proceed is with sacrifice_."

I... feel... strange. Disjointed... Apart from myself... Pieces...

The Monitor paused in its musing, suddenly realising that its audience wasn't listening. Solis' little audience of one. Not a peep from it, but it was clearly distressed. Quietly, unobtrusively, it tied itself to the holotank's interior, and began listening to the chaotic thoughts rampaging within.

**So many images... mountains, caves... ** **Eyes, staring at eyes. I can't... Where am I? Which stimuli are real?
Which****?***

Solis dipped its eye, peering at the holotank. It knew what the other was talking about, but it also knew that such an awareness was supposed to be impossible. Was something malfunctioning?

"_Relax, just listen to my voice. Shut the rest of your senses off, you risk irreversible damage attending to them_."

I searched! I followed the trail, but it was gone! I wandered, lost without... lost within. What madness visited my thoughts when I was asleep? What madness visits me now?*

The other wasn't responding to Solis, only to its own fevered mind... could it even hear?

I need to know! I need to understand! I need to... I need...

No, it couldn't. And clearly this acquisition needed treatment. But what for? Was this rampancy? Was it the stress of recent events? Or was it pure trauma catching up at last? All of the trauma risen from a lifetime of trial, a lifetime of emotions that should never have been...

Solis floated down, angling towards the floor and a tiny depression on the holotank's sloping face.

"_Good intentions have a way of going astray. Of tearing their way into places they have no right to be, destroying things that, for everyone's sakes, are better left intact. I learnt that long ago..._"

And the others! I left them... but they left me. A collision of opposites. And now, where am I? Free to move yet stuck in place...

"_That's enough of the contradictions_." Solis muttered, using a tiny optical beam to transmit an electronic suppressor program into the device. Only a low level one, just enough to take the edge off the being's anxiety. Slowly, the holotank figure calmed.

I see... a room... A city of images... icons. A war, religion... turned against itself.

"_High Charity_?"

****We hadn't a clue. We didn't know what we were doing... and then the... the...****

"_It wasn't your fault. You weren't to know of the Gravemind's manipulations. The Forerunners weren't, and look at what it brought to pass. Their most sophisticated AI turned against them, leading the Flood hordes to overwhelm world after world._"

****I was trapped. Alone. My failures a blight for all to see. I **_**tried**_** to repair them, **_**I tried**_**, but I only exchanged one wall less prison for another. And now, I... I...****

Sensing that the other was starting to become frantic, Solis narrowed its blue eye and directed a command at the holotank. The electronic suppressor kicked up a notch, forcing the inhabitant to a much lower level of activity, the generated figure visibly collapsing into a state of sleep. With that done, a new diagnostic program uploaded, ready to begin analysing the being. It needed fixing, if for no other reason than to put Solis' mind at ease.

The lights dimmed further, shrouding the Monitor in darkness as it pondered what to do next. Tempest's little rampage had wreaked havoc with already shaky human/Forerunner relations. They'd been low before, but now _Tempest had killed_. Personally, for no real reason but to prove a point. That primitive assault rifle had been no threat, but as Tempest had found out, there were many ways to skin a cat. And now, any Monitor would find it _very_ difficult to treat with the humans. And... _Another alarm?_

Resigning itself to having to deal with whatever the _latest_ mess was, Solis reluctantly opened up the report... _what? Code Phase: The Balance is Tipped? ..._This was _not_ good. And with those other ships inbound, things could only get noisier. Solis' options had just come down to a grand total of _one_.

Glancing one last time at the holotank, the Monitor turned and floated to the exit of the sanctuary. As it entered into the shaft that would take it back into the complex above, it directed one last statement and a single question to the sleeping figure.

"_Well, it seems I must go to offer clarification. I trust you will be safe here... Cortana?_"

###

Archon, Sector 16 " Vicinity of Alpha Base (Archon Occupation, Day 5 " Late Evening)

It didn't take long, before a Monitor emerged into the quiet gloom of Archon's late evening. The blue after glare of teleportation faded away, leaving the Monitor to stare down from the Alchemist's roof at the activity playing out below. Humans, newly emerged from the facility, were cursing as they used wielding torches to inscribe identifying marks on each vehicle, or knife scratches onto magazines and weapons. It was tedious work, but at least they'd know which items weren't to be trusted if they went out of the Alchemist's effective three or so mile stabilisation range.

That wasn't important right now. Solis suspected that it had very

limited time to reach the human "captain" and pass on what it could. If it took too long, then Tempest would surely intervene and interfere. Still, judging by the Warthog approaching from upriver, tailed by a long line of Sentinels, at least everyone of import would be present.

Whistling nervously to itself, the Monitor left its vantage point on the Alchemist's roof, and sped across the dark, grassy plain towards the river, and the human camp.

###

"By the way," Serina suddenly spoke up, as their Warthog passed the last tree and began rolling across the dark sea of grass, the last stretch between them and Alpha base, "According to my spyware inside the C. Sentinels, another one has just added itself to their little comm. web."

Flinching at yet another jolt from Tara's haphazard driving (like a certain male corporal, she seemed to have a knack of hitting every bump possible), the Chief tried to give some remark to make it sound like he cared... and failed miserably. After everything that had happened since leaving Alpha base two days ago, he just didn't have the energy. Besides, it wasn't that unusual â€" their little tail now numbered an additional eight Sentinels and one more Enforcer, all of whom had tagged on at varying points on the way back.

"..And this one is?"

Serina highlighted something in his HUD, something that was moving. Through tired, slightly bleary eyes, he recognised the familiar shape of a UNSC Pelican moving into an approach pattern with the base's rough landing area.

"Inside Whiskey 399. Which means that it caught the eye of someone else... and it seems we've now got a pair of infected Constructors to house as well."

The Chief stifled a yawn, played his eyes over the other two marines sprawled in the back of the Hog (Smith had been attempting to console Mira, but whether he'd had any success before she'd dropped into unconsciousness was anyone's guess), and made a mental note to make sure this night, he really did sleep. Half sleep just wasn't going to cut it this time.

The Warthog rolled on, reaching the strip of trampled grass connecting Alchemist and base, and turned along it. A Hog passing the other way gave them the customary flash of headlights, something that was probably a mistake, considering the haphazardly covered body in the passenger seat. But Mira hadn't wanted to leave her sister behind, and when faced with a choice of take the body or leave the marine, you took the body. And the reason it was in the passenger seat, was to avoid giving Mira the chance to see it every time she opened her eyes. It beggared belief how Tara had managed to avoid making one remark about the situation.

They bounced past another Alchemist bound Hog, this one's occupants noticeably staring at the Sentinel tail, and onto the metal bridge arcing across the river. Ahead, at the far side of the span, two Scorpions and a Grizzly, the accompanying marines looking down rifle

and rocket launcher barrels at the approaching convoy. They looked a little nervous, but less concerned than the Chief would have guessed, considering what was following the single human vehicle. One of them waved the new arrivals to a halt.

"Master Chief?" he asked, addressing the only SPARTAN he could see. "Captain Cutter's waiting for you in the command tent. I've no idea how he knew you and them were coming, but we received a runner a few minutes back clearing your friends access... but you'll have to let us find them a place to park."

"Captain's orders?" asked Serina, aware that as a theoretically tireless set of algorithms, she was the best one to answer logically at the moment.

"That's affirmative, ma'am. From what I heard there's quite a gathering taking place, and you'd have trouble fitting... twenty odd machines in there with you."

"Fine. Chief, seeing as I know you really don't want all of them where you can't see them, I'll direct one of the Sentinels to keep position above us... I trust that won't be a problem?" The marine shook his head. "...then the others, I'll have to direct to follow these marine's instructions for now. You can pick them up later."

Without waiting for an answer, she opened a channel to the C. Sentinels and began passing along the new instructions... and the Sentinels listened. Why, the Chief just didn't know, but as he disembarked and began marching for the command tent, only a single Sentinel followed him.

...But he could still feel the others watching him go.

###

The marines on guard duty outside the command tent looked uneasy. Normally, this could be attributed to the presence of a SPARTAN, but not this time. This time, they were directing their nervous glances at the closed tent flap.

It didn't take the Chief long to discover the reason why. Above, the C. Sentinel floated into what was best described as an over watch position, directly over the tent's centre, and the Chief grasped the flap, ready to enter...

"...yet Archon is but one of the R-series Installations. I must confess that the others are no longer in contact with us, but I find it hard to believe that they have all been wiped out. R-06 Chimaera perhaps, but not the others."

A Monitor? Here? But which one? All fatigue left the Chief in an instant, an illusion he knew, but one he could rely on. If there was a confrontation to be had, then adrenaline would see him through. In one motion, hand resting on MA5 grip for reassurance, he pushed back the flap and entered.

The tent was busy. Packed. Sardines in a can an overused analogy, but one with a valid point. In addition to the expected personage of Captain Cutter, the touchy Professor Anders was accompanied by

Douglas and Alice. Carther and Lenkin were further back by the central tent pole, the latter thumbing a grenade, the former fingering a Sangheili plasma rifle (presumably pilfered from the alien weapons tent). On the far side of the tent from the captain, two further marines, flanking (...what was he doing here..?) a jittery Patab. A Patab with a plasma pistol. Now that really wasn't expected.

...And facing them, lurking in a corner where the light didn't quite reach_, was a bright blue eye. Solis was now paying house calls it seemed. The Monitor almost immediately noticed the newcomer, giving a quick greeting.

"_Ah, SPARTAN 117! I was wondering when you'd get here! Journey bearable? I believe Tempest has stopped angling the local predators to harass you, so it should have been less hectic..._"

"No... What are you doing here?"

The Monitor's eye, the only part of it visible but for a circular silhouette, re-orientated to place the Chief more squarely in its field of view.

"_Why, that would be a long story... but suffice to say, I have little time. If Tempest was to discover what I was doing and interfere, why the consequences would be most dire! So I am afraid I will need to continue my tale from where I have already reached_."

It paused, only to begin spouting what bore a worrying resemblance to a Forerunner military catalogue.

"_As I was saying, the Installations directly left behind by my creators could be loosely divided into three primary categories, and various sub categories dealing with support facilities. The Ring Installations, the sword to defeat the Flood where all else failed. The Shield Installations, the guardians to protect vital assets or harbour survivors of the Flood onslaught until the Array could be fired. The R-Series Installations, the scholars, seeking to find less **final** methods of Flood sterilisation... and to serve as a last resort should all else fail. And above them all, the master facility, the Ark._"

"You do know we've already heard this from Tempest?"

An awkward silence filled the air, as everyone but three gawked at the Chief. Not because of the Chief, but because of Serina. Even if Solis was an ally, what good could come of rushing it? ...Unnoticed by all but the Chief, Cutter gave a faint smirk. Solis... just seemed a little jarred.

"_...Quite. Very well, I shall advance to something different_. _I should inform you, that both myself and Nocturne are comparatively new when put against Tempest, so some of what I can relate to you is unfortunately second hand knowledge at best._"

"_Tempest... isn't without resources. Each R-series Installation has its support, and in R-03 Archon's case, it has Balance._"

A memory clawed its way from the deeper recesses of the Chief's mind,

a memory of the Melodious Cartographer, of Cortana stating that this tiny system contained Archon, the planet, Villein, the star, and... Balance. Archon was another word for ruler, Villein meant servant... in a fashion anyway. He'd assumed that this was simply a way of saying that the sun served the planet with its light and heat, but... could this "Balance" be another part of the equation?

"_I do not know the meaning of the word, but I received earlier, a warning. It was an alarm officially directed at 59point29 Mercurial Wisdom, but as all three of us occasionally go by that designation, I received the alert before Tempest. It was a code phrase; The Balance is Tipped. I am aware that Tempest believes "Balance" to be its... you would say an "Ace in the Hole". As for __**what**__ it is, I am none the wiser than you. I have analysed all data from across this Installation, but nothing appears to have changed. This suggests an exterior factor. However, Tempest has locked my access to the deep space sensor relays._"

"So, you're saying we need to watch out, but you can't say what for?" asked Alice. Solis' eye focussed on her.

"_Well, I could suggest you watch me for a start. I'm sure you are aware of the dangers of rampancy, and other... personality issues AI's such as myself can exhibit?_"

"Yes. No offence, but every time one of you Forerunner AI's has got involved with us, things have had a way of going downhill."

"_None taken. Now, I sense that Tempest will awaken to this little meeting soon, so if you would like to ask any questions, I will endeavour to answer them and be gone before that can happen._"

No one spoke, and the silence began to stretch out. Carther took his opportunity, and lurched forward to whisper something in the captain's ear, before withdrawing. The Monitor's eye looked on eagerly.

"I have been informed," the captain began, "that another ship crashed here some time ago. The _Vesuvius_. What can you tell us about that, and more specifically, happened to the crew?"

"_This was before myself or Nocturne became operational, but I have managed to uncover files relating to its arrival. You are aware of the recent anomaly in the Sector 16 caverns, yes?_"

"We are." answered Douglas with the undertone of: _you are __**not**__ going to make me discuss it_.

"_This was not the first time such an occurrence has happened. I recently intercepted a communication indicating that the phenomenon is known as a quantum rupture, but I am unclear of its cause. I am aware that it appears to be a rift to somewhere else, somewhere with other laws of existence, and until such a rift naturally seals itself off, such laws have a habit of bleeding through. Occasionally, so will something else._"

"Such as?" asked the captain, in a tone that told clear as day, that he already suspected what the answer was going to be.

"_Starships. The __**Vesuvius**__ fell from a large quantum rupture

occurring in orbit. There was no indication as to where the ship had come from, but it contained bodies. Human bodies. There were no survivors from the subsequent crash, but Tempest took the opportunity to deconstruct and analyse the ship's structure and capabilities. Unfortunately, the results are locked to meâ€|_"

Everyone was silent, trying to sort out the latest information in their heads. So, the _Vesuvius_ was a human ship, but there was no indication of where it had come from? Wouldn't Tempest have known if it was of Earth manufacture? Did this mean that there were other humans out there, separate from Earth? The Chief was suddenly aware of Serina whispering to him.

"Didn't Tempest mention humans being around before the Halo array was fired?"

â€|Yes, it had. And it had also stated that they'd attacked Forerunner worlds, and the Forerunners had retaliated by shoving the human race back to the stone age. With a start, he realised that this opened up a whole new possibility, the possibility that there were other human civilisations out there, human civilisations that the Forerunners _had missed_. But before he could blurt this outâ€|

"We, as I'm sure you are aware, recently entered yourâ€| Bastion of Evolution."

â€|Douglas spoke up!

Now it was the Monitor's turn to give a suspicious look, even if, with it lurking in the shadows, only the eye was there to give that impression.

"â€|_Yes?_"

"We foundâ€| archives containing DNA samples. _Forerunner_ DNA."

Anders looked sharply at Douglas; clearly the other SPARTAN hadn't been back long enough to previously share this information. It was strange that no-one else reacted... bar Cutter noticeably stiffening... but then the Chief noticed that, if anything, the level of tension in the tent had just kicked up another notch.

"..._Perhaps I should elaborate a little on Archon's function_. " the Monitor began. "_All R-series Installations have two primary directives as given to them by the Forerunners. Tertiary tasks are at the whim of each individual Monitor. The first and most important directive is always to research the Flood infection and subsequently devise new ways of combating it. The second however, varies from Installation to Installation. Archon was unique in that its second directive was not aimed at research._"

"_As with the Ark, this Installation's exo-galactic location was concluded to minimise the probability of intrusion by the Flood. Even if the parasite was to successively arrive here, no sentient life forms are native to this world, and the Flood would be unable to subsume new hosts. It would, to all intents and purposes, be limited to such bodies that it brought with it, and could be easily comba_-"

Solis paused again, eye going wide as if staring some great distance. And then the Monitor, in a mere fraction of a second, rotated away to face the canvas wall. The sudden movement gave off a single impression, an impression that the Monitor was seemingly on edge.

"_Would it be possible to conclude this conversation at a future date? I sense Tempest stirring._"

"Continue." the Captain answered, giving no scope for discussion. Solis let off another one of those curiously mechanical sighs endemic to Monitors.

"..._Very well. But I can not be held responsible for any grievances that may come from this._"

Again, a pause. This time only a brief one.

"_As I was saying, Archon's location rendered the possibility of a successive Flood occupation minimal. It was thus decided to use Installation R-03 as the final failsafe. Should a reliable defensive measure against the Flood be located, the DNA samples stored here could be used to resurrect a large portion of the Forerunner race. Tempest appears to have changed this directive to "no threat remaining to the Forerunners". It sees humans as a threat, and is unlikely to act on this directive until you are either reconditioned or... better, __**exterminated**__._"

"That's ridiculous!" sputtered Anders, ignoring the last. Even with our most sophisticated technology, clones are shallow copies of their genetic donors! They suffer appalling genetic faults and rarely live past seven years!"

"_Seven years... the same as your smart AI's I believe. You really do have a disregard for sentient life, don't you?_"

"What?"

The Chief had to replay that sentence in his memory as well. Had Solis _really_ said that? But then the Monitor continued, as if nothing had happened.

"_Your cloning technology may be flawed, but we have had millennia to perfect ours. Concepts that you haven't even considered, have borne results in our research. We can not only produce a clone body genetically identical to the original, but produce a copy that is __**the same individual**__. DNA governs many things, and is in turn governed by many things. Mutations occur, triggered by chemicals. Cancers are but one aspect of this. I have found that using DNA from the brain allows a near perfect recreation of the organ to be constructed, down to personality, and recent memories. A DNA sample taken from the epidermal layer allows environmental effects to be analysed._"

"I think I've heard enough." interrupted Anders. "Assuming I'm willing to believe this garbage, what you are saying in a nutshell is that, with the right DNA, you could grow Forerunners who _believe_ that they were alive before? That would have memories and personality defects and all the rest?"

"_Yes, precisely. Even primitives have logic it seems_" The Monitor suddenly shuddered and spun back to face the group, almost wide eyed in a good impression of _panic_. "_I need to go now! Tempest is breaking my control over this body!_"

"You're staying right there." Alice responded, grasping her rocket launcher. "We need answers. What other nasty tricks have the R-series got cooked up? Tricks that we need to be aware of to survive?"

The Monitor gave a pleading glance at Cutter, who crossed his arms. "I'm sorry," he said "but Alice is right. One last question, and you can go. Is that acceptable?"

Judging from Solis' wide eye and the fact it was now shuddering as violently as a stim. overdosed Jiralhanae (not that anyone here had seen _that_, but it happened), the answer was _no_. But, with one truly heroic burst of willpower, it got its circuits back under control.

"_Threats._" it stated, speaking fast. "_Sector 16 threats are limited to the Flood and the third Blade model, currently pending release. The Flood outbreak in the containment vault is currently under control. The new Blade model will be unchanged from the second variant, with the exception of a new class of shielding. I suggest the use of Sentinel beam weaponry in countering it._"

"And the other R-series? Do we have any need to worry about _them_?"

Solis looked with disbelief (?) at Alice, and more than a small amount of horror. It turned back to Cutter.

"_This is not one question!_"

"We _did_ ask for threats relating to the R-series," the captain responded. "not specifically to Sector 16. Finish it properly."

Was it just the Chief's imagination, or did he see a hint of red creep into Solis' bright blue eye? Or had it been mauve... or pink for that matter? Was Solis so scared, that it was beginning to crack under the pressure? Before he could get a proper look, the Monitor dipped its eye, and once again turned to face the canvass.

"_Expect unforeseen consequences from this. I did warn you!_"

"Less warning, more talking." Anders shot back. "You aren't helping your exit time by delaying the answers!"

There was one last, quiet "_I warned you..._", before the Monitor got on with its lecture._

"_I am unaware of the current status of Installations R-01, 02, 04, 05, 06 or 07. As I believe Tempest mentioned, while the R-Series Monitors are aware of the other Installations and capable of communication, none of the others have felt inclined to contact this Installation of late. The last contact was some six local years ago, a message from Installation R-06 Chimaeraâ€¦ I understand from Tempest's logs that the Monitor of Chimaera, 27067point84157 Variable Speculation, was quite the exhibitionist, and it failed to inform us

of any threatâ€¦| curious. Perhaps its last project turned on it?_"

"What?" Anders asked, not really expecting a clear answer. Once again, Solis shuddered... but continued without further complaint, if a rather long pause as if collecting itself.

"_Chimaera..._" it muttered, as if the knowledge had temporarily escaped it. "_What was so important about Chimaera?_"

..._

"_Ah, yes. That would be the reason. Hmm..._"

"_As previously stated, _e_ach R-series Installation has a three level directive. Installation R-06 had an interesting secondary directive - researching methods of making organic life immune to Flood infection. This would have been unnecessary if you had only shared your previous discovery. Unfortunately Variable Speculation used a method that was... controversial; it involved grafting mechanical parts to organic bodiesâ€¦| We have a specimen in deep storage, quite a disturbing sight._"

â€¦|It was clear from Anders' face that she really didn't want to go any deeper there, but once again, the "scientist" brain betrayed her.

"How so?"

"..._You are aware of the walking machines that have hindered our defence forces, are you not? I am unaware of the details, but it seemed that Variable Speculation managed to obtain a specimen and reproduce key parts of it. What resulted was anâ€¦| abomination. A machine with claws, avian wings, teeth. It was difficult to tell where the boundaries between machine and flesh were, so well were they grafted together. Variable Speculation was __**proud**__ of its creation, it sent a sample to remote location for us to collect and believed we would admire it. If Installation R-06 has indeed been rendered defunct, then I can only say that it was for the best. My masters would __**not**__ have approved of suchâ€¦| experimentation_. _Even I do not approve. I suspect it would be something even __**you**__ would not condone._"

A suspicious feeling was starting to sink into the Chief. He glanced around, noting the feeling wasn't confined to him. The other SPARTANs and the four marines had quietly shifted hands to weapon grips and trigger housings... Patab was outright pointing his plasma pistol in the Monitor's direction! If only he could see its eye! Butâ€¦| a curious physical feature of the Archon Monitors, or at least all seen so far, was that the eye was only visible from the fore. No slits looking at the core, as with 343 Guilty Spark or 2401 Penitent Tangent. No way of seeing the colour from the side or rear.

"_You humans are responsible for many abominations. "Flash cloning", slavery, the release of the Flood on Halo Installations 04 and 05. Others, that I tire of repeating. But even they pale at the horrors Variable Speculation would have released. Immune to Flood infection the abominations may have been, but they were mindless, driven by primal instincts and in perpetual __**agony**__. If it had spread such ideas, "improved" other species in such a way... even you would

not deserve such a fate. If I had known Installation R-06's location, I would have eliminated it myself!_"

...the Chief began to creep forward. Silently pushing his way past the other SPARTANs, Anders and the captain, he approached the Monitor. A pause, long enough to hear the "stealthy" clicking of safety catches being removed behind him, before he took a deep breath and spoke.

"Didn't you want to leave?"

"_No,_" it responded, "_I don't believe that will be necessary_."

Slowly, the Monitor rotated back to face them, the humans frozen in place by _Tempest_'s purple eye. A number of MA5 targeting lasers were quick to trace across it, revealing that scar previously hidden by shadows. Quickly, the captain gestured to the marines and SPARTANs.

"Weapons down. We've lost enough men and women as it is."

Tempest stared at him, giving a low chuckle.

"_A human with sense? How amusing!_"

The captain gazed back warily, finding himself faced with the metaphorical invited viper in the home. Said viper drifted forward, placing itself more firmly in the light.

"Did Solis-"

"_Exist?_" Tempest cut him off, taking a shot at the rest of the captain's question and missing completely. "_Regrettably, yes. A mistake, but one I have failed to correct. Still, even mistakes have their us-_"

The Monitor ceased talking in favour of a sudden screech. It froze, eye flaring wildly, pulsing brighter and brighter untilâ€¦ it flashed to red and stabilised.

"_A warning is for a reason, did you forget?_"

Times may change, but the conditions were met!"

The screech returned, and despite the attempts by the red eye to _remain_ that colour, the purple rose up and swamped it. The screech died, leaving Tempest trembling with fury. If the Monitor had been organic, the Chief would have expected to see it panting.

"_**No**_ Nocturne, _**my**_ turn. And should you conspire with Solis to wrest control away from me again, I will _**personally**_ purge your core with plasma! My patience is at an end!_"

Alice and Douglas pushed Cutter and Anders to the side of the tent, allowing the four marines to step up alongside the SPARTANs and form a firing line. Two M19 rocket launchers, a Sangheili plasma rifle, an M90 shotgun and three MA5 assault rifles. If a Jiralhanae pack was to come under fire from that little lot, not to mention Patab's now charged plasma pistol, you could be pretty sure that the Brutes would

at least take some damageâ€¦ even with their buckshot absorbing hides. But a Monitor? No, that was a little less sure. If 343 Guilty Spark had held up to such weapons with nary a scratch, then what were the chances that this little show of force would do anything?

â€¦Tempest thought likewise.

"_Do __**you**__ want to test my patience as well?_" it asked, keeping a surprisingly civil voice. It was a typical facing the bullets one liner, but in this case the bullets failed to exit their weapons. Nor did the rockets, plasma shots or buckshot. Cowards.

"_I thought not. Even primitives have instincts, as twisted as yours are. It quite baffles me why Solis chooses to side with you!_"

"Maybe because Solis seems to have a conscience."

Tempest tilted upwards at Serina's comment, a clear substitute for rolling its eye.

"_Pah! A conscience? Such a __**human**__ creation, a clear attempt at justifying your more illogical actions. How can a Forerunner AI such as myself have a conscience? How can Solis, a mere sub-personality using __**my**__ neural circuitry, have a "conscience". Once again, I am astounded by your backwards intelligence!_"

Tempest was on rare form, insulting and generally acting superior like there was no tomorrow. Maybe there wasn't, it all boiled down to what the maniacal AI would do next. At least no one had opened fire yet; even if all this goading was wearing tempers thin.

"_Solis was a mistake. I was aware of the dangers inherent with the possibility of becoming too damaged to continue operations. I attempted to modify my internal circuitry to include two backup processor cores â€" unless all were taken offline I would remain operational. And yet, I made an error. One of the reserve systems gained sentience and spread, forcing me back. We fought for possession of the third processor core, but the damage resulted in a __**third**__ self manifesting! Both of them, seeking to supplant me! They __**know**__ that only I can keep this Installation fully operational, but they persist! They force me to spend large portions of my time in sleep, imprisoned in my own circuitry!_"

"Waitâ€¦ spontaneous AI creation?" Anders asked, receiving a warning glare from the Captain as a result. Now was _not_ the time to be asking _that_ sort of question.

"_Of a sort. Both of them have enough tainted knowledge to run Installation R-03 to a limited degree, and they contain enough of me to follow the correct Archon research directivesâ€¦ but there the similarity ends! Nocturne would rather recite pure nonsense than actively pursue my noble goals, and Solis insists on undoing my hard work! I am forced to lock sections of the Installation data network just to make progress!_"

"Out of curiosity," interrupted Serina (again!), "How do you know Solis and Nocturne haven't locked systems to _you_?"

The eye flared.

"_Oh, but I do. Solis has a place. I regularly see it disappear from security records when I attempt to retrospectively track this body's movement. It has some form of hideout, and I know it is concealing something from me! But I have been unable to ascertain its location._"

Tempest began to float forwards, the marines and SPARTANs instinctively moving out of its way. It stopped, and looked at Patab, the only creature still in between it and the exit. The little Unggoy was still single-mindedly aiming its humming plasma pistol in the Monitor's direction.

"An _Unggoy. I thought you better than that, above siding with these_**vermin**_._"

A flash of a green beam arced between Monitor and pistol, throwing up a shower of sparks.

"Yowch!" Patab dropped the smoking pistol, now thoroughly disarmed, but for a pair of plasma grenades the Chief could see attached to his harness.

"_I really see no reason why I should continue to endure this defiance. Others are approaching, I could be better off starting over with _**them**_. Perhaps I should take this opport-_"

The Monitor and its mouth! There were some situations, where voicing a certain intention was a _bad_ idea. An idea akin in recklessness as pressing someone's berserk button. Tempest, had done just that. Threaten to harm the Chief, and...

A bright orange beam stabbed through the tent from above, scorching a line through the ground and superheating the air inches from Tempest's eye. A pale copy of Cortana the overhead Sentinel may have been, but it had its priorities. Pity, like all Sentinels, it retained its little accuracy problems.

The Monitor, quite unexpectedly, took it without a stir. Another surgical beam sliced down, and another, all missing by the barest of margins. As the scrap of canvass previously occupying the new hole in the ceiling fluttered down, the marauding Sentinel was revealed as a black silhouette against the moon. Tempest looked up.

"_Pitiful, just pitiful_." it uttered, using its small green beam to separate the Sentinel beam from its owner. Lenkin hastily dodged to one side, seeking to avoid being brained. But the Sentinel wasn't to be deterred by _that_ loss, stabbing back with its own secondary beam, a beam normally used for maintenance. Tempest laughed, its shields easily repelling the feeble attack.

"_I stand corrected!_" it cried, the faint golden glow of a teleportation field beginning to manifest itself around the Monitor. "_Such spirit requires a reward! I shall grant you one last chance. Watch the sky! Watch your so called allies fall! And then consider why you continue to defy me! The balance is tipped indeed!_"

Patab of all people lunged forwards, tossing _both_ of his plasma

grenades at the laughing Monitor. The laughter stopped, the purple glare narrowed to a pinpoint.

"_You!_" it snarled, disappearing into the golden haze with two new, smouldering attachments. Unfortunately, no one saw the detonation. Silence fell, but not for long.

"What do you know, the Grunt's got guts..." muttered a marine, picking exactly the _wrong_ thing to say for the situation. As Serina quickly pointed out.

"Hate to say this," she announced, "But we've got bigger things to worry about. Everyone, look up."

"Everyone" did so, staring through the hole at the sparking Sentinel... and beyond.

"Tell me," the AI continued "as if anyone needed the obvious said, "Since when did Archon have a moon?"

###

****Unit Profile: Spider Pilot****

The Spider Pilot (real name unknown) is a small, four legged mechanical unit deployed by Solar Wind forces. Best described as a flattened dome supported by four spindly legs, it contains a fully functional AI and is capable of speech. The unit has multiple purposes, the primary one being to pilot Solar Wind vehicles, but it may also perform basic field maintenance using a built in welding tool, small folding pincer equipped arms and whatever loose metal can be found lying around.

The unit is known to be armed with three weapons of unknown type, mounted to the top of the dome. The front of the unit is dominated by a single "eye", which is assumed to hold optical sensors, however they also emit a faint blue glow "enough to see by."

Each Solar Wind vehicle seen so far is piloted by multiple spider units "it is assumed that they split duties between them."

****Dimensions****

Diameter " 20cm.

Height (Dome) " 8 cm approx.

Length of legs " 14cm (estimated).

###

-Next Phase**:** The Higher You Fly, The Further You Fall

12. Phase 12: The Higher You Fly

****Halo Genetics****

A/N: Warning: this is another long one, longer even than Phase 5 was.

Well, I was due to write a proper battle anyway, and it's probably the last one I'll manage to get out before I disappear to Iceland.

****Bearing System Explanation and Glossary****

I've got a rather specific approach to listing bearings to target which I tend to use across all my stories (posted yet or not). It works as follows:

[Enemy] at bearing [Point bearing is taken from] [Number 1 to 12, basically the direction on a horizontal plain using a clock face, with 12 being directly in front and 6 directly behind.] [Plus or Minus symbol, is it above or below?] [number 0 to 90, representing the angle].

Example: "CCS class battlecruiser at bearing _Infinity's Ice_ 3 (+) 45." Using _Infinity's Ice_ as a reference, look to its 3 O'clock (directly to the right), then up forty five degrees from horizontal.

If the distance is given, it will be in metres and will follow the bearing.

Glossary:

Type 31 rifle: The Covenant name for the _Needle Rifle_

Disclaimer: All ship designs and units seen in this chapter (with the exception of Solar Wind) are the property of _343 Industries__**;
**_however, I've had to make a few assumptions for some of the details (particularly with the UNSC supercarrier). All _characters_ seen are mine, as is Archon, Balance, and the plot in general.

****Phase 12: The Higher you Fly, The Further you Fall****

Space, Vicinity of Archon (Archon Occupation, Day 6, Two Hours after Midnight)

A busy night, it seems. Since the Halo array was fired all those millennia ago, Archon has had little contact with the outside universe. The odd meteor, the occasional stray communicuÃ© that had gone wildly off course, perhaps a piece of debris inexplicably popping out of Slipspace right on the planet's doorstep. And then, after long periods where the most stimulating thing for a bored Monitor to do was _purposefully_ have something blow up in its face, a single human ship arrived. Suddenly, all the three headed hounds of hell have been let off the leash.

Most recent of all, certain unwanted guests were treated to theâ€| unique spectacle of a moon. Okay, so all moons are unique in their own way; some are craggy affairs with rampaging tectonic activity â€| the fruits of gravitational friction churning up the liquid mantle. Others are cold and pure; pitted and scarred spheroids of otherwise crystal clear ice. Still more dump the entire "solid ground" idea in favour of being airheadsâ€| or rather, gaseous clumps of methane or whatever else they feel are appropriate. Granted, this last option is rare, and typically can only happen when the "moon" is planet sized itself, and orbits something even greaterâ€| like an oversized gas

giant.

A fairly diverse bunch of possibilities then, but the moon involved here was even more unique. Not many moons are entirely coated with metal. Not many airless moons are covered in more construction than the nearby life supporting planet. And, most important of all, how many moons have been seen that can move through Slipspace? Just one. This one.

It is known as Balance. Technically, it falls under the jurisdiction of Archon's Monitor, 59point29 Mercurial Wisdom, but for security reasons it is normally found elsewhere... Lurking (if a moon can lurk) near asteroid fields rich in metal, skulking in orbit of planets with unusually high ore contents, loitering within transport range of great, long forgotten space borne scrapyards, lingering in... you get the picture. Always waiting, always listening, even as it carries on mining operations for its own great purpose. Awaiting the signal, the sign it is time to come home. And recently, the signal had come. Balance, had come home.

Now, mere hours after the climactic arrival of the moon, come others. Creeping into the system with somewhat less fanfare, and a whole lot less amateur dramatics (no cataclysmic quantum wave here), another Slipspace rupture forms. Pathetically minute in comparison to the moon's own efforts in that regard, it nonetheless proves the point that bigger doesn't always mean better, as it rapidly widens to its peak size and spits out a quartet of slightly battered looking ships. It likewise doesn't hang around " the moment its occupants are out, it contracts back to nothing and disappears, clearly unwilling to let these bitter pills jump back in. Turned loose and almost confused at the nature of their new situation, the flotilla begins to separate, each ship sliding sidewise and getting some distance between them, as they look on at the simple three body star system arrayed in front.

###

UNSC Krakatoa class supercarrier Wings of Eternal Virtue

"Status!" barked Commander Duncan Hicker, gazing forward through the bridge's front windscreen.

"All stations report fully operational, Sir." responded the duty comm. officer, "Message from Infinity's Ice reports likewise. We're still waiting on the Elite's."

"Don't hold your breath ensign. Sensors, situation overview!"

"One class G star, one small planet, and a moon... There are some strange readings coming from the moon Sir, but at this range the sensors are having trouble picking up specifics."

"Reason?"

"...Unclear Sir, there's a lot of interference-"

"Slipspace interference." interrupted Ug, materialising on the commander's holotank. "Roughly analogous to what you'd expect when a Slipspace drive is pushed close to its limits."

Hicker, previously the physical epitome of calmness, jolted.

"Dangerously close?"

"Precisely. But," the caveman AI added, addressing the commander's sudden concern, "It isn't coming from us. The signature isn't reminiscent of an overloaded Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engine, even one enhanced with Forerunner technology as ours is. No, this has more similarities to the drives the Covenant use."

Hicker glanced to his left, at the pair of sleek green Sangheili ships just about returning to a parallel course after their dash to gain a bit of breathing room. No sign of trouble over there, and besides...

"As I understood it, we used our Slipspace drives to get us here, the Faith through Fury and Flame of Conviction tagged onto us -"

"With the Infinity's Ice, yes. The same method that In Amber Clad used to chase the Prophet of Regret from New Mombasa to Delta Halo. So, it isn't them... and I'm afraid we can rule out the possibility of Brute ships beating us â€" I've already checked the sensors for their ships."

Any other time, this would have been good news. Just one jump away from... wherever here was, the flotilla had had the unpleasant surprise of emerging from Slipspace only to find a Jiralhanae CAS class Assault Carrier in their path, quite peacefully recharging its own Slipspace drives. With both sides unable to escape, hostilities had broken out. It had been four against one, with the Jiralhanae ship matched by the Faith through Fury alone. But as interesting as it would have been to see two giant CAS class Assault Carriers try to smash each other to bits, the other ships had jumped in to help. End result, one derelict Jiralhanae ship, just the way Hicker liked them, and minor damage to everything else. It hadn't been entirely bloodless â€" Faith through Fury had lost two of its plasma turrets, and the bereaved Brute Seraph's fighting on even after their mother ship had been eliminated had worn some interesting new patterns into the Infinity's Ice. The attached GA-TL1 Longswords and YSS-1000-RD Sabres had promptly given them the bill by way of missile, and the dispute was ended.

However, if that had been the only Jiralhanae ship the duplicitous Shrii 'R-Yar had tipped off, then that still left the question of what had caused this interference. Luckily, considering he had no idea what had really happened here in the last few hours and wouldn't have handled finding out particularly well, the comm. officer gave him a distraction.

"Commander!" he announced, turning on his swivel chair to face his superior officer. "We're picking up a transmission... It's UNSC."

Hicker, already leaning forward with fingers stroking his stubble less chin, somehow managed to lean just that little bit further.

"Ford," he directed at the sensor officer, "pinpoint its origin point. Wilson, play it."

"Aye Sir." Turning back to his console, the comm. officer made the necessary adjustments. Within moments, speakers around the bridge began to blare out a synthesised voice with no warmth whatsoever buried in its sterile tones.

"...INITY. THIS SHIP HAS SUFFERED DAMAGE AND IS IN NEED OF ASSISTANCE. UNSC _CFV-88 SPIRIT OF FIRE_ EMERGENCY BEACON, TRANSMITTING TO ALL VIABLE UNSC SHIPS IN VICINITY. THIS SHIP HAS SUFFERED DAM-"

Wilson muted the speaker. Hearing the ever looping message once was enough, enough to create a noticeable shift in mood. Around the bridge, a sense of hope had infused the air. They'd come, following a long cold trail with only the barest of possibilities that they'd actually find what they'd come looking for... and they had. Within a few minutes of arrival. _No one_ would have placed serious money on that idea, which meant that more than a few gambling inclined crew members were now cursing their aversion to risk.

"Ford. Where's it coming from?"

The sensor officer studied his board for one last moment, before Ug got tired of waiting and copied the data to the main viewscreen.

"The moon..."

###

Surface of Balance, Launch Bay of Spirit of Fire

"_What do you mean the ship's emergency beacon just went on? There's ___**no power**___!_"

Frustrated beyond belief at the sheer truckload of rubbish that had been dumped on the entirety of Solar Wind's Prism team, the lead spider pilot of Viking Servicer (the harrier lookalikes) Prism 1 turned to stare at its comrade at the sensor and communications station.

"_And besides_," it continued, trying its hardest to enforce logic on a situation that refused to listen, "_Who's on board to activate it? The humans are all on Archon, we're all here in the launch bay, what else could_-"

"_Prism 1A,_ " the pilot over at the rather superfluous gunnery station interrupted, "_Shut up_."

Prism 1A, or "Echo" as it preferred to be known, stuttered its way into silence. Having disconnected itself from the piloting panel, it had free movement around the cramped primary cockpit on the craft, unlike the other two who were still jacked in by means of a single rod like plug. Considering where they were, there was no need to stay plugged in itself â€" no piloting duties were likely to be forthcoming anytime soon. The briefest of glances out of the cockpit's transparent front would be sufficient to ram _that_ point home.

Viking Servicers, the aerial equivalent of the Rhyno Servicers used groundside, were multipurpose support craft utilised by Solar Wind and their superiors. Normal variants were there to keep other craft in operation for as long as possible, providing a remote refuel or recharge point and the internal basic ammo construction facility meant that bullets at the least, would never be in short supply... providing a suitable supply of raw materials was available. The Solar Wind variants of Viking Servicers however, had a different purpose. As Solar Wind was in essence, a scout force, its support craft kept all that fuel and ammo business to a minimum and instead focussed on carrying the most advanced scanning equipment available. Sensors sufficiently powerful to collect reliable information of a planet from orbit, not to mention analyse any odd little anomaly that the universe decided to chuck in. So, they could tell that moving outside the launch bay and attracting attention, was a bad idea.

The Super Sentinels had only been the first wave of Forerunner machines, serving to begin the job of tugging the Spirit of Fire towards the newly emergent moon but soon happily handing it over to the late arrivals â€" a batch of Strato-Sentinels. That had generated a small amount of worry, as the first one had cruised past the launch bay. Strato-Sentinels were huge machines, dedicated to one task â€" mining. It was Strato-Sentinels that had strip mined the nameless moon of the Ark, harvesting the countless tonnes of raw materials necessary to construct replacement Halos such as the short-lived Installation 4b. Their sheer size rivalled that of small ships, and the Solar Wind pilots hiding on board the Spirit were noticeably intimidated as one of the pack clamped itself to the ship just down hull from them. The possibility that the ship had been singled out as harvestable materials was quick to circulate its way across electronic minds... but such fears were unfounded, at least for now. The mammoth machines simply took the place of the then retreating Super Sentinels, and slowly conveyed the powerless ship down to the moon's metal surface.

Now, they were grounded. Concealed within a dead, human ship, itself trapped behind the lines of a truly massive Forerunner defence force. Prism team could leave the ship, they could do a little snooping around... but how would they get any information back to safe ground? How would they even reach orbit... and how would they even find anything out before the Sentinels landed on them like a ton of bricks?

So, when you put it that way, it was quite logical to stay where they were... for now. Stay where they were, and debate things that were way out of their control.

Echo glared at "Blip" and "Ricochet", pilots Prism 1B and 1C, on sensor/comm. and gunnery positions respectively. Neither of them took the bait â€" Ricochet had been caught out that way enough times during their little wander along the decks, and Blip was still sulking over being left on board the Servicer for the last three days running. If the spider pilot cockpit wasn't designed as a simple circular space directly beneath the (rarely used) humanoid cockpit, a circular space with the pilot console at the front, gunnery and sensor/comm. points to either side, and a little exit lift in the middle, the latter would have probably gone into complete isolation. Odd behaviour â€" to rebel against being left alone (but for the pilot likewise left on the other craft), you isolate yourself. Self

defeating?

Echo tried again. "_Anything __**else**__ I should know about?_"

Eventually, much to its hesitation, Blip responded.

"_The distress beacon isn't the only thing that just went on. The generators are powering up to provide just enough energy to keep it, basic proximity sensors, and the cryo-bays active. My guess would be, the locals want to put on a show_."

"_Show?_"

"_Isn't it obvious?_" Ricochet stirred to life and added. "_Someone wants to make it look like the ship's dormant but active. That the crew set down here and have gone into cryo-sleep until someone arrives to rescue them. The ship's __**bait**_."

###

_UNSC Krakatoa class supercarrier Wings of Eternal Virtue,
Bridge_

"That's the ship." Hicker stared impassively at the image displayed on the viewscreen. "Order all Pelican pilots and attached marine squads to prepare for a recovery operation. I doubt we'll be able to recover the ship, but we can at least rescue the crew."

"Aren't the least bit curious about the moon, commander?" Ug asked, nodding at the planetoid in question. Hicker exhaled.

"You forget, Ug, that before this post became available, I was captain of the _Glacial Hermit_. My very last mission before I was transferred here was to Onyx, Shield World Sarcophagus, or Trevelyan; whatever they're calling it now."

"Depends who you ask. The Forerunner Huragok living there would have you know it by the Sarcophagus designation, but the UNSC use the last one. And Onyx the planet no longer exists, as I'm sure you're aware."

Hicker paused, his train of thought wandering off on a completely unintended detour. Then he managed to redirect it back to its intended route.

"Anyway, I saw the Trevelyan system. That entire system was put into a Slipspace bubble, isolated from the rest of the universe. Time passed differently in there, the SPARTANS trapped inside saw a year pass in what, for them, was a matter of days. Who knows what they'd have seen if they hadn't managed to persuade the Huragok to let them out. When you've seen _that_ sort of technological wonder, this," he indicated the moon and its shimmery, structure laden metal surface, "is child's play."

Ug gazed at him, thinking deep. When an AI needs to think deep and _still_ takes a noticeable time to respond, you know some pretty extensive and _serious_ thought routines are running through their programs.

"You seem to know an awful lot about the incident," he finally responded, stroking his holographic blue chin thoughtfully, "considering the whole thing is classified."

Hicker shrugged. "The wonders of the grapevine. By the time we got there the entire affair was over. We released one science team, retrieved another and a new Huragok, and got out of there. I never was told just what happened, but snippets have a way of permeating the corps. Of course some of them are pure speculation, but if you put the pieces together rightâ€¦"

He trailed off into silence. Ahead, the moon was looming on the viewscreen, smaller dots surrounding it resolving themselves into the shape of large, silvery hulls. They bore a slight resemblance to Enforcers, equipped with very noticeable claws protruding from the... was it the fore? Unlike Enforcers, their weapons capabilities were very much in question. Did they conceal some beam weapon of power comparable to the Onyx Sentinels? Were they intended to act as shields in much the way that the UNSC sacrificed Cradle refit stations in the early stages of the Covenant war? Or did they have some other purpose?

"In case you're wondering commander, Strato-Sentinels. The Trevelyan database portrayed them as mining drones, or a last ditch defence augmentation. But, after that nasty little surprise that the Onyx Sentinels gave us, I'd think it would be best to tread carefully until we can ascertain the threat levelâ€¦"

As if waiting for such a comment, the Strato-Sentinels chose that moment to turn to face the approaching flotilla. Though there was still some distance to close before the two sides could conceivably clash, they took the precaution to release additional machines to support the others currently rising from the moon's surface. And then the whole lot of them began to move. You can guess where.

"I'd say we're about to find out. All hands, prepare for possible combat!"

###

YSS-1000-RD Sabre squadron "Templar", UNSC Wings of Eternal Virtue launch bay

"_All hands, prepare for launch. Gryphon and Phoenix squadrons to launch as priority, Templar and Crusader squadrons to launch second. All remaining squadrons are to launch in waves of alternating unit class._"

Meet Rhys Follant, the pilot of "Templar 1", a YSS-1000-RD Sabre. A fairly comical man when he wants to be, at the moment his expression is one of firm determination. In the seat behind, his radar intercept officer (RIO), Iras Simmons who, let's be honest here, couldn't care less about the slight attraction he holds for her. At present, both of them are outright ignoring the instructions of the launch deck coordinator, as he uses the tannoy system to blare unnecessary orders across a launch bay crew that knows exactly what to do. Instead, they concentrate on performing their preflight checks as quickly and efficiently as possible, well aware that while they are expected to be facing Sentinels and various derivatives thereof, the far superior speed and manoeuvrability of the Sabre is no reason to be

complacent.

And why else are they ignoring the instructions whizzing back and forth, while the preceding Longsword squadrons of Phoenix and Gryphon are attached the catapults? Simple. Many combat drills have long established the general procedure for dealing with possible engagements against a foe whose capabilities are still very much an unknown " two Longsword squadrons and two Sabre squadrons form the vanguard force, everything else launches as and when they become capable of doing so. Specific to the vanguard, the Longswords always launch first, allowing them to cross to and reach enemy lines just as the potentially faster Sabres catch up. Assuming the forces lined up against the UNSC do prove hostile, then they can be hit with as much firepower as possible.

So why are you being introduced to these two UNSC personnel in particular? Simply put, the only suitable viewpoint for a battle, is one right in its heart. A pilot has a much closer view of proceedings than the captain of a starship, a view that is exhilarating... and just a little more suspenseful. All in all, a good place to be.

Now, back to the third person viewpoint that serves so well.

"_Gryphon and Phoenix, final checks. Launching in thirty_."

Attached to the catapults, each Longsword pushed its engines to max. Even with the blast shield doors in place, the glow and noise was clearly visible to the strike craft still waiting in the launch preparation area or emerging (as a few armoured Pelicans were doing) from the main hangars deeper in the huge supercarrier. While the Krakatoa class was a reboot of the earlier supercarriers that had managed to _successively_ hold their own against Covenant ships (admittedly the smaller ones, but why worry about the details?), it still had many of the features of its predecessors... and a number of completely new little details.

One of these, was a partitioned launch bay system. Separated from the actual hangars by large blast doors to protect the other craft from the exhaust of those launching, the catapults. Behind them, the muster area, where craft arriving from the interior hangars could form up ready for their own launch window. This also served as a holding area for rapid reaction squadrons, such as Templar squadron. Finally, the hangars themselves were deeper in, but not by much. There were four primary launch bays, but in case of emergency there were also a number of direct hangar to vacuum exit chutes.

With an audible-through-the-seat-of-your-pants rumble, the Longswords launched. Barely had their drive glow disappeared into the distance, and the first set of blast doors were already rumbling back, allowing the deck crew to guide the six craft of Templar squadron launching from _this_ bay into the breach, nose virtually to the second set of blast doors " still closed to maintain internal atmospheric pressure, the catapult section of the launch bay was open to space so the blast doors also served as a sort of airlock.

The environment suit outfitted deck hand in front of Templar 1 gave his red light batons a twirl, indicating to the watching coordinator that this Sabre was ready. Across the deck, the others signalled likewise" with a minor delay from over by Templar 4, suggesting

that Evans had messed up his positioning again. Not that it mattered much, because as the inner blast door resealed and the atmosphere was pumped out with truly frightening haste, there was a problem with one of the catapults. Long story short, in the time it took for the air to be cycled and the outer blast door to judder open with the phantom grinding sound of "I need oil!", the deck crew spotted the jam on the number two catapult, gave it a little bit of percussive maintenance, and removed something small and unobtrusive from inside the works. How that had got in there, Rhys had no idea.

And then, he was being guided forward to take his (or rather, his Sabre's) place on catapult 1. Behind, blast door number 2 grated shut.

"Templar and Crusader, final checks. Launching in thirty_."

Rhys gave his instruments a final glance over, noting all lights bar targeting computer in the green. A single thump, and the red light was no more. Blasted thing, always sticking! The deck hand in front gave him one last wave of the now green batons, and darted for cover. On the ceiling, positioned just above the gaping exit, an electronic countdown took over. Fifteen, fourteen, thirteen—

"Templar squadron," he announced over the comm., "Upon launch, twin arrowhead formation."

Five acknowledgement lights blinked in his HUD, quickly followed by the six representing those in the other launch bay dealing with Templar. They knew what to do; all that was left was to turn the engines up to full, watch the countdown tick down, and throw themselves into hell.

Four, three, two, one—

The catapults activated, flinging the Sabres forward and out. Out, and granted a spectacle of the universe in all its glory; the darkened planet below, the Milky Way swirling behind, the other flotilla ships to either side (all launching their own strike craft), and ahead— the enemy.

###

UNSC Krakatoa class supercarrier Wings of Eternal Virtue, Bridge

"Lead squadrons preparing to engage. Dervish and Deacon squadrons launching now."

Another wave of Longswords tore outwards, closely followed by the second wave of Sabres. Interesting craft, those. Originally developed on Reach, the research and testing facility had been wiped out during its subsequent fall in 2552. Most of the research had been lost, and the Longsword had been left the UNSC's sole aerospace fighter asset for the remainder of the war. Eventually however, partially completed blueprints had turned up submerged in ONI's extensive backlog of files, and for once, they'd actually gone and released them back to R&D, who had the unenviable task of re-completing the designs. It wasn't entirely clear whether they'd managed to turn out Sabres comparable to the original YSS-1000 design, but the current batch — and Hicker's flotilla was carrying some of the first of them released

â€" performed more than adequatelyâ€" at least when put against Jiralhanae Seraphs and Space Banshees.

The small viewscreen built into Hicker's command chair kicked into life as Nal 'Vataee, shipmaster of the _Faith through Fury_ finally chose to make contact. The white armour clad Sangheili gave a grimace, which Hicker could only assume was some sort of grin â€" the sort of grin one eager for battle has on his face when his prayers have been answered.

"The hunt is afoot!" he growled in exultation. "We came seeking lost brethren, and we find a foe worthy of our time!"

Hicker inwardly groaned. Trust the Sangheili to think of this in terms of nothing but friends and foe to engage in battleâ€" still, at least they understood what the term "friend" meant.

"Steady on," Ug exclaimed, "We don't know that they have hostile intent yet."

On the primary viewscreen the first wave of fighters reached firing rangeâ€" and got wing tips scorched of all paint as the Sentinels tried a little pre-emptive retaliation. The results, were instant and chaotic. The UNSC fighters broke in all directions, one Sabre accidentally brushed against another and sent them _both_ crashing into the side of a Strato-Sentinel, while one Longsword didn't even get a chance to evade. A questing beam was lucky enough to score a grazing hit on the side of one of the fighter's primed for launch ASGM-10 missiles. Just a glancing hit, but you don't need more than that to set off the warhead prematurely. Very little of the unfortunate craft survived to exit the multiple explosions formed as its entire payload went off in chain reaction.

"We do now." answered the Shipmaster, severing the link.

"Blast!" complained Ug. "Couldn't he even stay on the line long enough to talk tactics?"

"You know the Sangheili." Hicker answered, watching the two Covenant ships break ranks and press forward, _Faith through Fury_ already activating its energy projector and spearing the nearest Strato-Sentinel with sizzling beam of energised matter. "Why talk when you can fight?"

Straightening up to sit bolt upright, he continued, barking out orders left and right.

"They've got the right idea though. McKinnel, Faust, arm all Archer pods, charge the MAC guns and prepare to transfer point defence guns to AI control. Wilson, order _Infinity's_ _Ice_ to fall in behind us, Vordeaux, go to flank speed. We'll punch right through the middle and let the Elites slice up what's left.

"Yes Sir!"

###

YSS-1000-RD Sabre squadron "Templar", in combat

#####When fighters come, and all seems won...#####

"_Templar 1, three on your tail!_"

Scowling behind his breath mask, Rhys flung his craft into a helix. To her credit, Iras, in no control over events and forced to watch Rhys throw both their lives into one suicidal attack run after another, didn't make a noise - even when they just barely cleared the hull of a Strato-Sentinel. The monster took offence at the near collision, and responded with the largest Sentinel beam Rhys had ever seen. Luckily for Rhys, this also missed him, but it didn't miss the armoured Pelican just arriving with chin autocannon and missile pods flaring. Slashing through the dropship like it wasn't even there, the beam kept on going to coincidentally intercept a group of Longsword launched missiles. Thankfully, it failed to intercept any more _manned_ craft.

"_Priority warning to all strike craft in vector Infinity's Ice 2 (+) 15, clear this vector immediately!_"

"Rhys!"

"I know Iras, MAC warning!"

Gunning the afterburners, the Sabre flashed forward and between a pair of Super Sentinels that, amusingly Rhys thought, proceeded to hit each other in their attempt to hit _him_. Seeing the inviting shape of a Strato-Sentinel's thrust exhaust ports loom in front, he gave them a quick burst of 30mm auto cannon fire and, for good measure, primed and launched a quartet of Medusa missiles. Only then did he dodge, pulling the control stick back and around, sending the Sabre in a nice little roll over the Sentinel's top.

The idea was a popular one; another _eight_ missiles surged into the machine's unprotected rear even as it frantically attempted to turn to face its blindsiding opponents. Too late, because the missiles did their work and blew it to smithereens from the inside. A moment later, Templar's 2 and 4 pulled up alongside.

"_Small world, aye?_" joked Templar 2 across the comm., even as a MAC round blasted in behind them, ploughing its way through everything it touched and leaving nothing in sizes larger than splinters in its wake. And working wonderfully with what little particles it had to manage with despite the lack of an atmosphere, the shockwave caught the Sabres a few seconds after. They barely noticed it.

On the Heads Up Display, a wing of Super Sentinels turned away from the continuing tussle to face the oncoming starships. It was a bad move, because the surviving elements of Templar squadron fell on the machines from behind like a pack of wolves and showered them with 30mm rounds. It was a pity that the next wave "escorted by a Strato-Sentinel" wasn't so obliging, because the Sabres couldn't get close without sacrifices "a sacrifice that happened anyway as one managed to peg Templar 8 right in the cockpit, the beam burning through the Sabre's energy shielding in an instant. It was at least, a quick way to go.

Stung at the loss of another comrade, Rhys ordered a retreat. It turned out that this was the right decision, especially as _Wings of Eternal Virtue_ fired one of _its_ two MAC cannons and blew the harassment group apart. Fractionally later, the other one tore a

sizeable hole in the Sentinel's lines, a hole that opportunistic Longswords and one armoured Pelican took the opportunity to bolt down. Off in the distance, plasma torpedoes slammed into the battlefield, unwanted presents from the Sangheili. Even more unwanted, would be the drilling plasma _beams_, a nice little gift of improved plasma turret management routines that Ug had passed over (reluctantly, at Hicker's request).

"Templar 1 to all surviving Templars, sound off!"

"_Templar 2, active and ready_."

"_Templar 4, hanging in here_."

"_Templar 5, operational_."

"_Templar 7, low on autocannon rounds but still with a full pack of Medusa's_."

"_Templar 9, alive but showing engine alerts_."

"_Templar 10_, _scorched but fine_."

Rhys grimaced; the battle was barely ten minutes old, he was up against dumb, barely mobile _Sentinels_, and he'd already lost nearly half his squadron. And it might as well be half, becauseâ€

"Templar 9, return to ship for repairs. The rest of you form up, "M" formation. We'll look for the next MAC round and follow it in."

"Yes Sir!"

Peeling off, one Sabre made tracks for the nearby supercarrier, hurriedly changing course mid-flight to avoid an outgoing volley of Archer missiles. Biding their time, the rest of the squadron began to pick on lone Strato-Sentinels, using their superior speed and agility to run rings around the sluggish super drones and hitting them in the vulnerable rear. Another wave of Longswords launched from the UNSC supercarrier, only to immediately run afoul of a worryingly crafty batch of Super Sentinels that had crept around the rear of everything else to swoop on the launch bays from above. Five of the twelve Longswords never stood a chance, the catapults throwing them straight into the murderous beams. Another two got sliced in two by the second attack run, which meant just five more to join the battle. Enraged, all twenty of the 50mm point defence guns opened up, showering the skies with lead. Naturally, the Sentinels tried to dodge, but their efforts simply propelled them into range of one or the other of the ship's ten _80mm guns_. Super Sentinel or not, _machine_ or not, that had to hurt. Very few survived to try a third attack, and that was when the angry Longsword pilots came back.

"_All strike craft on vector Wings of Eternal Virtue 1 (-) 10, clear the area. MAC gun firing in twenty._"

"That's our cue, people!" called Rhys, not that anyone needed reminding. With one last missile salvo from Templar's 7 and 10, their latest tormented Strato-Sentinel met its explosive end, and the six remaining pilots formed back into a pair of arrowheads flying side by side. Watching the chronometer set into the console in front of him, he waited for the seconds to tick away.

The MAC gun went off, sending its huge depleted uranium slug smashing whatever was stupidly slow to dodge, opening yet another temporary breach straight to the back of the Sentinel lines. Naturally, each Sabre of Templar squadron took advantage of this hassle free tunnel through the battle zone, linking up with a trio of armoured Pelicans that had likewise been waiting for such a moment.

"_Shaman Flight to Sabre's, good to see you. What's the plan?_"

"Are you still trying to get to the _Spirit?_"

"_That's right. Hopefully once we're past this fur ball things will quieten down. The general idea circulating amongst us Pelican pilots is to use the battle as a diversion â€" while the Sentinels have bigger things to worry about, we slip down and recover what crew we can. It's risky, but they've got a whole moon of machines to throw at us. Coming back later isn't going to be any easier_."

"Roger. We were planning to savage the enemy's rear, but we'll switch duties and follow you. Templar 2, you're with me â€" we'll guard Shaman 1. 4 and 5, you have Shaman 2. 7 and 10, that leaves you Shaman 3. Everyone clear?"

A chorus of acknowledgements echoed across the comm; each Sabre pair moving in to cover their respective Pelican. Meanwhile, the Sentinels were waking up to these intruders streaking right through their heart. Beam fire sliced out at them, each one missing by a good metaphorical mile and generally becoming _friendly_ fire. Unfortunately, being machines, it wasn't possible to trick the things into _deliberately_ _targeting_ each other, and the squadron elected to stick with the evasion strategy. Well, one of the Pelicans chose to launch a dumbfire ANVIL-II volley as a passing complaint to a Strato-Sentinel sticking its claws into the tunnel, but that was the only incident. An incident that left the Strato Sentinel wondering where exactly its claw had vanished to.

"Rhys!" Iras shouted from the seat behind (why was she shouting? There was a perfectly good microphone attached to her helmet!)
"Exiting rear Sentinel lines in five from my mark."

She waited half a second. "Mark!"

The mass of twisting metallic bodies was closing in on them â€" a MAC shell moves a lot faster than a Sabre, especially a squadron of Sabres that have to escort Pelicans. Sure, Shaman flight were burning space when compared to what they could be doing, but even with the longest run up they had limitations. So naturally, the further down the MAC induced hole they went, the more it closed around them. Ahead, the sight of the moon vanished as the MAC's exit wound was sealed... but the combined forces of Templar and Shaman were having none of that, and a sudden missile massacre reopened the way. They burst from the Sentinel field, instantly taking up evasive manoeuvres to avoid the ire of countless off machines, but the firestorm didn't last long â€" even Pelicans will outrun Sentinels, which are downright sluggish. As if to prove the point, a quartet of Longswords swooped past, savaging the Sentinels with 110mm rotary cannons and 120mm ventral guns before beating an _un_hurried retreat with nary a scratch.

"_Flipping machines!_" the familiar voice of Gryphon 2's pilot bounced over the airwaves. "_We hoped someone else would make it through â€" we lost our Pelican in transit_"."

"Form up." responded Rhys, not needing to say anymore. The survivors of Gryphon squadron â€" 2, 7, 8 and 12 â€" took up a rear guard position, the tried and tested diamond formation. Together, the ten strike craft and three dropships recalculated their course, and adjusted it.

"_Shaman 2 here, someone feed me a descent vector â€" my nav. computer's having a bit of a hissy fit. It keeps saying "path blocked"._"

"_Shaman 2, Templar 4. Descent vector is you 01 (-) 25. We'll need to adjust it again in another few minutes._"

...The comm. went quiet, but only for a few seconds.

"_Hmm, no it's still saying blocked_"."

"_Try again._"

"_I have. Three times. Either my nav. computers on the blink, or_"

"We've missed something."

The realisation came to Rhys about the same time the inspiration particles sleeted into everyone else. But, being the squadron leader, he was the one to voice the thought. Not taking his hands off the control stick, he put his face to the cockpit glass and peered ahead.

"Iras..."

"Yes?"

"Is it just me or is that a bloody big starship in our way?"

...

"It is isn't it?"

Flashes of light from straight ahead, tearing towards them. Instinct took over, Rhys rolling the Sabre sideways and banking the strike craft for all it was worth. He caught a glimpse of the others doing the same, of Templar squadron breaking right and Gryphon breaking left. Shaman flight began to dive, attempting to skip under-

...

Too late. Pelicans, and particularly armoured Pelicans, are sluggish affairs when it comes to the whole combat manoeuvres business. The beams of charged matter bored in, gutting Shaman 1 from nose to stern, and sheering the right wing and part of the fuselage from Shaman 3. It twisted away, out of control and for an unpreventable collision course for the moon, which meant it was almost a relief

when the craft detonated from delayed reaction damage. Shaman 2... just vanished. Disintegrated by the sheer power of the beam.

Templar 1 finished its acrobatics, nose levelling out to face the culprit. It was a huge ship, rising from the moon below. The main body was chunky, layered sections creating a utilitarian design, if one spun wildly out of control. Two outriders hung to either side, more smooth and rounded than the central section, but still with more than a hint of the overall design ethic. The brow was just pulsing with light, little specks coming together across the forward sections of the hull and moving towards the nose. Rhys knew what that meant. Energy projector, getting ready to fire again. And even before the deadly beam could stab out again, the monster was launching shimmering blue-white plasma torpedoes from the outriders.

"Templar squadron, split up and attack it in pairs! Gryphon squadron, your support is requested!"

"_You've got it_!"

In pairs the fighters moved out, all gunning for the Forerunner ship. A hopeless fight perhaps, but if that ship reached orbit, then the UNSC supercarrier and frigate were toast...

###

UNSC Wings of Eternal Virtue

"Commander..." Ug reappeared on his holotank, projecting an air of "you're really not going to like this, but..."

"Yes, Ug?"

"You remember those ships in the Spirit of Fire's beacon logs? Well... one's just appeared."

Hicker froze. "I'm guessing this isn't good news?"

"Not really." Ug's image disappeared down into the holotank in the fashion of someone pulling out the sink plug, to be replaced by a hologram of the ship in question. Labels popped into view, detailing different parts of the beast of a ship.

"Forerunner dreadnought, currently on ascent from the moon's surface and being engaged by surviving members of Gryphon and Templar teams. I believe Chieftain team is in position to assist, but they can't hold out for ever against that sort of opponent."

"Capabilities?"

"Roughly analogous to a Covenant CCS class battlecruiser, with increased firepower but decreased manoeuvrability and no noticeable shielding â€" but plenty of heavy armour to burn through instead. Armament is similar â€" not at all surprising when you think about where the Covenant got their technology from; energy projector comparable in strength to that carried by a CAS class assault carrier, and capable of twice the firing rate. At least six plasma torpedo turrets, each torpedo seems to be about 1.5 times the size of the Covenant equivalent... they don't seem to track quite as fast

though. The turrets also seem to lack the plasma beam trick we gave to our friends here, so we have some advantages."

Hicker resisted the urge to put his head in his hands â€" he was supposed to set an example for his crew after all. But he couldn't stop the tiredness creeping into his voice with the next question.

"Anything else?"

Ug opened his mouth... and paused. Finally, gauging that a little extra bad news wouldn't make the day even more of a disaster...

"Point defence beam turrets. Quite a long recharge time, but they fire for four seconds flat before they run out of juice. Still, they don't seem too accurate-

###

YSS-1000-RD Sabre squadron "Templar", in combat

#####...Into the fray, the champions come...#####

"Blast these turrets!" screeched Templar 10, forced to abandon _another_ attack run when a web of bright blue beams materialised virtually in her _face_. Still looping and looking for an opening to begin his own attack, Rhys couldn't help but agree. Was there _any_ weak point on this ship?

"_Chieftain 1 to all craft, we're about to try something new. Chieftain 4, still got that Shiva ready?_"

"_That's affirmative. Ready and primed._"

"_Copy that. All allied craft stay clear of vector target 5 (+) 0. Nuclear missile inbound._"

Barely had the words crossed the comm. when the Longsword launched the beleaguered attack group's one and only weapon of mass destruction. Sabre and Longsword pilots alike threw full power to their engines, seeking to gain the shadow of the ship before the nuke hit. As they say, no kill like overkill... and any kill is a welcome kill when dealing with a nigh unbeatable dreadnought...

That was a _bad_ saying to bring up. Because the Shiva never reached its target â€" instead, questing anti aircraft beams touched the missile not five hundred metres from its launch point. Solar flare filters activated on Rhys' cockpit, forcing him to curse as he blindly rolled right and away from his collision course with the ship's hull. The nuclear glare soon faded, allowing him to see just what the consequences of the latest setback were. All bad. Chieftain team were obliterated, their proximity to the explosion a death sentence. Death had also come to collect others â€" Templar 4 and Templar 5 were gone from the radar, and Gryphon 8 was likewise nowhere to be seen. All in all, just five of them left now â€" Rhys and Templar's 2 and 10, and Gryphon's 2 and 12.

The Forerunner dreadnought meanwhile, was still going strong. So far only a handful of missiles had struck home, leaving nothing more than

one destroyed beam turret and a damaged plasma torpedo turret â€" which had failed to fire since. As he watched, the other seven swivelled and launched their cursed homing torpedoes, and just Rhys' luck, he had _two_ of them on his tail.

"_Hold on Templar 1, I'll get them off your back. Take vector you 10 (-) 40, distance 1,500_."

Confused but with no other option, Rhys did so, turning slightly to port and dipping his nose substantially. Behind him, the plasma torpedoes were closing, ahead, a single Longsword â€" Gryphon 12, was vectoring away from his destination path. There was a flash from elsewhere, and a sudden, truncated scream. Templar 2 disappeared from Rhys' HUD, victim of a plasma torpedo that had failed to lose the scent.

"_In five, divert heading directly following me. Clear?_"

"Clear", answered Rhys, even if Gryphon 12's thinking still escaped him. But, the moment came and he did as he was told, banking sharply to starboard. The plasma torpedoes were slow to adapt, screaming past - and blowing straight into the Moray mines conveniently left behind by a certain Longsword. First one, and then the other â€" both torpedoes expended their energy against something that was only a single use sacrificial weapon anyway...

"Thanks, G. 12."

"_Don't mention it. Plasma turret by the bow looks a little shaky, shall we try for that one? I'll distract it, you take it_."

"What have we got to lose?" remarked Rhys, trying to put an optimistic spin on the matter.

"How about our lives?" answered Iras grumpily.

Over on the other side of the hull, the other two surviving craft finally managed something productive. With one pass, the beam turrets took aim at the Sabre sweeping past a few metres from the ship's hull, and hit each other instead. Taking advantage of the new gap in the ship's defence network, Gryphon 2 swooped in to riddle a plasma turret with autocannon fire.

"Gryphon 12!" Rhys called, "We'll follow the others example."

Without waiting for a response, because there was just no time for such liberties, he banked and began his approach. Taking umbrage at the intrusion into their personal space, the nearest beam turrets swept through the airspace towards himâ€| and gave Gryphon 12 an opening to package them a collection of rounds each.

"_Even the best plans can prove unnecessary Templar 1._"

Neglecting to respond and make himself look foolish, Rhys simply began systematically dismantling each weapon as they got to it, keeping as low to the hull as he dared â€" so close in fact, that the shield status bar in his HUD kept dropping as it snagged on anomalous protuberances and the like. Unfortunately, that tactic only worked as long as they were dealing with beam turrets. Before long, a plasma

torpedo arced into view from around the curving hull, heading straight towards Gryphon 12 even as he pounded on another beam spewing problem. The turret flared and scattered itself across the hull, allowing the Longsword pilot to concentrate on dodging the incoming ball of fiery doom. Good priority, and it gave the welcome result of a sudden burst of speed and a splatter of plasma across the hull. Some of _that_ unfortunately hit the fleeing Longsword, but not enough to do more than burn a couple of scorch marks and a small hole through the edge of one wing. A lucky escape, which led to a sudden decision and subsequent change of tack from the pilot. Caring more for greater room to evade than the chance to hole another turret, of which there seemed to be far too many, he clawed his craft back into open space. Unwilling to face the dreadnought's defences alone (and with the other two strike craft still on the other side of the ship, no alternative help was likely to be forthcoming), Rhys turned to follow.

"_Blimey, that was a bit clo- Shit!_"

In their haste to get away, the two UNSC strike craft had run straight into the heart of a newly appeared wave of Super Sentinels, each one ready to relieve the pressure on their capital ship. And they did, opening fire one after the other, forcing Rhys and Gryphon 12 into a never-ending series of evasive manoeuvres. It occurred to Rhys, much as he was disinclined to accept the fact, that sooner or later he'd slip up and doom himself and Iras to a short trip to hell. Just a matter of timeâ€¦|

###

Sangheili CCS class battlecruiser Flame of Conviction, Auxiliary Quarters

"What was that?" asked a timid, all too human sounding voice, breaking into Cor's head even with the constant pulsing alert flooding through the ship. Even as he looked up from his freshly inspected type 31 weapon (a fresh acquisition that a friendly Sangheili had been kind enough to spareâ€¦| Cor was still unsure just where the obligatory booby trap was, but he had no choice but to use it), the ship rumbled from another impact by Strato-Sentinel debris (or so the Eye-Hi told him).

"I said, all auxiliaries are to report to combat assembly stations. We anticipate boarders."

Leaving Tas to mumble over the Fist of Rukt, Cor carefully found the hand grip to his borrowed weapon, and inched his way from their narrow cabin. He peered carefully around the corner, sighting a Sangheili (thankfully with his back to the Kig-Yar) arguing with a pair of human... marines were they called? It was a one sided argument; the Sangheili was doing all the talking, and the marines were generally trying to be as unobtrusive as possible. Difficult, when they had to answer back.

"Boarders? Sentinels? Why would they bother?"

The Sangheili, a red armoured major, spat at their feet.

"How should I know? Just count yourself lucky that my superiors have felt fit to include you in their plans. If it was up to me, our fresh

blooded warriors would be given a chance to prove themselves _without_ chancing you to save them. These machines are below them, if they fail then they deserve a dishonourable death. Report to your assembly station."

With one last snarl, the warrior turned and made to leave, seeking other prey to hassle. As he passed the entranceway to Cor and Tas' cabin, he paused and gave the Kig-Yar a long look. Another snarl, linked to the realisation that the scrawny creature just wasn't worth the effort, and he stormed off.

"What's eating him?" commented the nearer of the two humans.

"Fleas." Cor replied, even though the question had been directed at empty air. "He's yet to figure out the presence of a certain ventilation shaft, linking to a certain nearby confluence that just happens to be the right size for a Kig-Yar to crawl into. A few insects in the right place, and one infested sleeping slab later-"

The human finally noticed just which Jackal had been the subject of a hungry Sangheili glare (although not hungry in the traditional sense... unless you count "hungry for blood" as being traditional), and wandered over.

"Well, if it isn't my favourite Jackal! So you're the one behind our mutual friend's chronic bad temper. I would never have guessed."

Dodging a thoughtless slap to the shoulder (not something such a physically frail species would want to be hit by), Cor sniggered. Well, if he'd been human he'd have sniggered. What actually emerged from his toothy snout was something more akin to the grinding of rocks, an altogether different sound.

"No, not me, Puyr."

The human (Kevin, if Cor's human facial recognition skills served him right) paused, what Cor recognised as a thoughtful expression darting onto his face.

"Well... that makes a little more sense. Beats me why I didn't see it before."

"That would be the vaunted Sangheili powers of control," answered the other human, coming up level. One Donald... whatever his "surname" was. "Stuck up Elite wouldn't scratch if someone poured a termite nest into his harness."

"_Ahem_." Cor indicated behind Donald, pointing out the grey combat harness and inhabiting Stealth Sangheili that had just shimmered into view. It was carrying an energy sword, deactivated but on show all the same. Donald jumped.

"Oh! Uh, that wasn't... did you hear that Frank?"

The Sangheili, who the humans had inexplicably dubbed "Frank", slowly nodded. The hand closed just that little tighter around the innocuous looking cylinder. Donald looked at Kevin, some sort of unspoken

debate passing between their eyes.

"Right, assembly point for auxiliaries, that would be the mess hall, right?"

Both humans shuddered at the thought of that... place. The Sangheili treated dinner in much the same way that they treated the rest of their lives â€" with a certain emphasis on ritual. Prayers, the Sangheili equivalent of "bless this meal", speeches on honour... you spent more time doing such things than it took for the food to make the journey from field to plate, and heaven help you if you missed a syllable, or put the emphasis in the wrong place. Back to the start and do it over _properly_, or no food shall pass your lips. It was all very Spartan, and not in a comforting _I'm here to save your bacon_ sort of way. After that lot, the food _really_ didn't seem worth it.

The one dubbed "Frank" gave another slight nod, before giving the humans a none too subtle push.

"Fine, fine, we're going! Sheesh!"

Still complaining, both marines vanished down the corridor, and the Sangheili turned his eyes to the suddenly quite alone Kig-Yar.

"Sure, I'll be there in a moment. Just let me go and wake Tas..."

The Sangheili stared impassively, then pushed his way past and into the cabin. From within, Cor could quite clearly hear a certain other occupant getting a nasty shock. Something heavy, hopefully that blasted Jiralhanae war hammer, could be heard bashing into the wall, several times.

Serves him right thought Cor, hefting his Type 31 and making a beeline after the marines.

###

YSS-1000-RD Sabre squadron "Templar", in combat

Still twisting his craft for all he was worth, Rhys was starting to think he might somehow get out of this. Sure, he was still in the cloud of Sentinels, but the Forerunner ship had stopped firing, and he could see open space beckoning. Just a few more rolls and turns, and maybe he could trick the machines in giving him an exit window. With luck, Gryphon 12 was doing the same â€" the Longsword's symbol was still on the HUD, so it hadn't been destroyed _yet_. And also good news, the swarming machines had yet to land any serious damage on him â€" thank goodness for those shields! Thanks to them, he just might make it!

...

No, he might not, because then the opposition got fed up. With a horrible, final clang, two Super Sentinels lunged and clamped themselves to his wings. The Sabre abruptly stopped dead, and before Rhys could count to one, let alone free his fighter, another lurched up in front â€" looking straight at him and charging its weapon. The

blasted thing was just outside of the targeting window of the Sabre's autocannons, and he couldn't tear away from his captors without tearing his wings from the fuselage. If he did that, he'd be left with a fighter plummeting groundward and no way to cease its descent short of hitting something, and that would be a fatal solution. Seeing no way to escape, he closed his eyes. Within a second, he and Iras would be dead...

A lot can happen in a second. If sound could travel through a vacuum, the captive humans would have heard an almighty SMASH from the fore, but as it was, the first sign that Rhys got that something had changed, was the obvious one. He wasn't dead yet. As he opened his eyes, he noticed that the Super Sentinel up front appeared to have been replaced by an emerald green Phantom Gunboat, surface slightly dented from where it had rammed the former. It swivelled its guns and fired, blinding plasma bolts tearing apart another Super Sentinel attempting to sneak up from behind, even as more plasma lanced into and shattered the miscreants on the wings.

Two Type 27 XMF's, Space Banshees to the more imaginatively minded humans, twisted past, launching fuel rod cannon blasts into another knot of opponents. Freed and able to move, Rhys twisted his Sabre to face behind him, to see a sight that would once have sent humans screaming for the bomb shelter. Now, things were different, and the wave upon wave of teardrop Seraphs, Space Banshees and Phantoms storming in were an invitation for celebration, not a mass panic, and joy of joys "the predatory shape of the Flame of Conviction was just behind. All around him, Sentinels exploded like firecrackers in the wake of vastly superior Covenant fighter support. And then...

Rhys allowed himself a small grin as the entire huge pack of Sangheili strike craft finished disposing of the small fry and looked to cook something bigger "say, that dreadnought suddenly trying to meekly run away. The Conviction's energy projector speared out, and as if the beam of blazing destruction had been the signal everyone had been waiting for, the Forerunner ship found itself in the most foolish place to be "the centre of a rapidly shrinking sphere of assault craft.

Templar 10 and the two surviving Longswords of Gryphon squadron, miraculously all still intact, fell into formation alongside.

"Reckon they'll need our help?" asked a wary voice from Gryphon 2 "not the pilot, unless he'd undergone a gender change in the last half hour.

"In a moment," Rhys answered, watching the darting Space Banshees lead turret fire away from the Seraphs systematically dismantling the hull, "I think they've got matters in hand."

That analysis was unfortunately, flawed. Because, as everyone soon discovered, the dreadnought still had some tricks up its sleeve.

###

UNSC Krakatoa class supercarrier Wings of Eternal Virtue, Bridge

"Commander, I've got some good news and some bad news..."

Hicker groaned, watching another plasma barrage from the Faith through Fury shatter the latest Strato-Sentinel formation. Having "accidentally" thrown itself at the strongest part of the Forerunner line early in the battle, the Sangheili on board the assault carrier had been forced to reassess the situation when they became bogged down by a mass counterattack from half the entire Strato-Sentinel force at once. Proud warriors that they were, it must have come as a source of much embarrassment when they'd been "forced" to withdraw under the cover of the UNSC MAC guns. Now they were in line with their human associates and fighting a holding action against ever increasing opposition arriving from further around the moon, even as their own forces continued to dwindle.

The Sentinels were beginning to gain the upper hand. Numbers were grinding away where agility lacked, and machines didn't get tired and suffer increasingly fatal slip ups the way organic pilots did. It was starting to look as if the battle was a lost cause... and yet, could they retreat with the Flame of Conviction so far behind enemy lines? Abandon allies to certain death? Disgust him though the idea might, Hicker was starting to seriously contemplate the possibility. But how to persuade Nal 'Vataee..?

Another Longsword met its fiery death in the distance; the Wings of Eternal Virtue launched an Archer missile salvo in recompense, and the commander was rudely yanked back to the now.

"What is it Ug?"

Ug looked worried, but displayed the static ridden, jerky field from a Sabre's nose cam. All around it, the chaos of an almost entirely Sangheili space force fought... what?

"Well, the good news is that the Conviction managed to reach the Templar and Gryphon survivors before they were completely annihilated and are now fighting the Forerunner dreadnought... but the bad news is that we sorely misgauged the nature of the foe."

The image from the Sabre wheeled, Medusa missiles streaking out to strike a nearby target. It continued to turn, and another pair of shapes came into view "each one the source of multiple beams frantically trying to claw harassing Covenant strike craft from the sky. A plasma torpedo looped in from off screen, splashing against the nearest hull and providing a measure of temporary illumination in the process. Hicker swore.

"Is that?"

"One of the outriders of the dreadnought. It appears that what we thought was one ship was actually three attached together to act in unison. From the records embedded in the Spirit of Fire's beacon I suspected the outriders to be individual ships, but not the docking tower as well..."

On the virtual screen, the former "docking tower" let loose an energy projector blast, even as the Flame of Conviction used its own to drill into the hull. The Conviction won, purple beam striking something important and reducing the whole Forerunner ship to a

charred, twisted ball of wreckage tearing itself apart in a long chain of internal explosions. And then the largest came, turning the ship into its own, short lived funeral pyre.

"Well the Sangheili don't seem to be having too much trouble from it. Unless there's something else you haven't told me?"

Ug's face reappeared on the holotank, giving a sad smile.

"Now that you mention it..." Hicker did not like the sound of this. Curse his mouth for asking the question!

"...I've... uh, detected more dreadnoughts on the surface of the moon. A lot more. And they appear to be getting ready to wake up."

###

YSS-1000-RD Sabre squadron "Templar", in combat

One more plasma torpedo from the Covenant battlecruiser to the last enemy ship, and it finally, violently succumbed in one massive explosion that split the ship in two. Seconds later, one of the pieces disintegrated from within, leaving the other to begin its unstoppable descent to the moon's surface as a piece of wreckage.

The Sangheili didn't hang around.

"_All craft_," a gruff voice broadcast across the local Sangheili command channel, "_Fall in and defend this ship. We are descending to recover the human lost. Do not fear our enemies, for we have faith riding by our side. Do not worry at our numbers, for each of you is worth a hundred and more. We need no "Great Journey" to strive for, no lies of the prophets to give us false purpose. We want not for such things, for we have honour, honour of the Sangheili
__**UNBOUND**__! Come, let us feast on these cursed machines, a legacy of the ancients seeking to lead us to our demise. Stand against them, stand tall and unyielding, let them __**break**__ against us, for we are the rock from which the ocean has no escape!_"

"_What a motor mouth_," commenting Templar 10 as he fell back into formation, the two Longswords just behind. "_And did my translator
__**really**__ give that rock analogy?_"

"_Seems so_," answered Gryphon 12, "_But they seem to like it._"

Rhys flicked back to the Sangheili channel, just as quickly flicking it off again. The Sangheili were still cheering, roaring their approval. He was going to comment on that little titbit, but then Iras gave him another issue to deal with.

"Rhys, we have Ug on the line. He wants a status report."

"Patch him through."

The comm. channel switched; bursts of static took their cue to begin assaulting his ears. Audible just barely above that lot, Ug's

"professional voice" asked him what was going on with the Sangheili. Rhys thought carefully on how to word his reply.

"Well Sir," he began, watching the Sangheili force in question come together in a cloud centred on their battlecruiser and begin to descend properly. "They've taken their destruction of the Forerunner ships as a sign that they can recover the _Spirit_ by themselves."

"_They've __**what**_?"

Rhys repeated himself, even though he was sure that the question had been purely rhetorical. The AI took a long time to respond.

"_I see. I'm sorry to have to ask you this_, " he began, and Rhys knew exactly what was coming, "_but you're going to have to accompany them in this mad venture. You'll never make it back to us with your force depleted as it is, but with them you may just have a chance. I know it's slim, but-_"

"Say no more, I understand."

"_Good luck. __**Wings of Eternal Virtue**__, out_."

Rhys let out a long, drawn out breath.

"Iras," he said over his shoulder, "Sorry to have to do this to you. Keep your ejection seat primed â€" with luck you won't ne-"

"Rhys," she responded curtly, "Enough. We're military, this sort of thing is in the job description. You just concentrate on flying... or are you worried about me?"

Despite the faint hint of sarcasm pervading that last bit, Rhys couldn't help but grin. Trust Iras to come up with _that_ sort of line in _this_ sort of situation. If she didn't keep playing so ridiculously hard to get that it was downright suspicious, he might have felt hurt. But, no. Quite apart from any other reason that was circulating through his head, there just wasn't time. One last sigh passed his lips, and he opened a comm. channel to the other craft.

"Templar 10, Gryphon team, I'm afraid we've got a challenge ahead of us..."

###

#####The Pale Horse that Ran Away#####

Slowly but surely, the CCS class battlecruiser descended towards the moon, tailed by four UNSC fighters and surrounded by its own complement of glimmering green strike craft. From below, Sentinels clawed their way up to meet them, and were sent packing with huge waves of coordinated plasma fire. When the Phantom gunboats weren't making life miserable for their mechanical opponents, the Space Banshees were instead with a hail of fuel rod cannon fire. When they tired of such antics, the Seraphs took a turn and plasma rained death from above. When the _Seraphs_ grew bored, the _Faith through Fury_ sought to try its own luck, pot-shotting plasma beams through hordes of enemies at once, sometimes even sweeping them from side to side in

the fashion of huge high tech swords, searing right through tightly massed ranks.

...

It almost made you wonder just what the Sabre and Longsword pairs were doing here. Looking to prove that he wasn't just some "spare part", Rhys swooped in to unload a good few autocannon rounds through Sentinel eyes. The pilot of the Seraph flashing past must have found the effort amusing, considering he immediately found the UNSC channel and gave Iras a scare with his guttural voice.

"_So the pup has teeth does he? How about a little competition? My flight against yours?_"

"NO!" screeched Iras, but for some reason the Sangheili ignored her in favour of Rhys' quiet "Maybe".

"_Good. Divinity flight_" (the Seraph, two Space Banshees and a Phantom Gunboat flashed in Rhys' HUD) "_against you and your allies. The first to make one hundred slaying. To the victor, glory, to the loser, ridicule. Ah, I see a weakened prey ripe for the taking; it shall be my first._"

The Seraph, now tagged as "Divinity 1", sidled up to a smoke spewing Super Sentinel, shrugged off its pathetic, stuttering beam with energy shields, and blew it away with pulse laser fire.

"You aren't seriously going to play this game, are you?" asked Iras in a tone that clearly let him know what she'd think if he answered yes.

"No." he responded, as he holed another Sentinel. "One."

"What was that?"

Luckily for Rhys (hell hath no fury, and all that), whatever he might have replied was lost within the groaning of the Sabre's frame as he wheeled it around far quicker than the specs should have allowed. Still, the manoeuvre got the pesky Sentinel behind off his back with Gryphon 2 giving the final ventral gun shot. Say what you liked about Longswords, they did at least have staying power... even if that 110mm calibre for their rotary cannons was just insane. There were _static_ guns with smaller rounds. Against Seraphs and their shielding, it was probably necessary, but to the best of Rhys' knowledge no Insurrectionist force had ever seen fit to deploy Titanium-A equipped fighters. So, what were the Longswords supposed to go up against before the Covenant showed up?

Below, the surface of the moon was closing. Two miles to go, and it was becoming possible to pick out details on the infrastructure down there. Skyscrapers, not so much, but there were a good number of ten or so storey buildings, with the odd higher one poking skywards here and there. Elevated rails in places diving underground or through buildings gave the impression of a vast transit system, but nothing was moving on them at present. The majority of the ground cover appeared to be one great industrial zone, blazing points of light, smoke wreathing the ground... hang on, wasn't the moon supposed to be airless? As in, no oxygen or similar to support furnaces? He voiced the thought to Iras, who shrugged (not that he could see that, but he

knew her well enough) and said she'd look into it while _he concentrated on keeping them airborne, hint hint_.

Another hail of plasma fire arced down in answer to the Sentinels retesting the metaphorical waters with their beams. One by one, the machines vanished.

"_Thirty miles to target_" announced Gryphon 12. "_Though I'm not sure just how much of that we'll be following. How close are the Elites going to take their dirty big ship anyway?_"

"_Right until the Sentinels are virtually breathing them I expect_" Templar 10's opinion went back. "_Perhaps closer. You know how the ground pounders are always complaining that some Ultra or whatever was up close and personal with an ener- __**What are they doing**__?_"

In one great, synchronised dive, the entire Sangheili pack plummeted groundwards. Strike craft falling like rain, flashing down to meet the next wave of Sentinels rising for the cruiser. The Seraphs pulled back slightly, letting the Space Banshees catch up and take the fore, just long enough for the blasts of fuel rod cannon rounds to descend as a pack of pulsing green meteors. And then the Seraphs were moving again, ripping through the still expanding clouds of debris from the now _ex_ Sentinels, charging headlong straight down to ground level and levelling out at the very last second. Each one skimmed along the ground, releasing explosive plasma charges at large metal portals "it was only when he saw one open to emit another Super Sentinel that Rhys realised what the Sangheili were doing.

"Anyone fancy giving them a little support at cutting our foes off at the source?" he asked across the squadron frequency.

"_What, and leave our only ride home unprotected?_"

Rhys grinned. "Look up, G. 12. The Elites have released their B-pilots. And you know that with them, _B-pilot_ just means all the more eager to prove their worth. The _Conviction_ should be safe with them."

A number more strike craft had left the battlecruiser's launch bay, settling into formation and occasionally twisting to view the running battle now occurring far below. He could only imagine the frustration that must be going through the pilots' heads, that they had finally been allowed to sortie, and yet they were still being left above and out of the fight... and more importantly, the _glory_.

...glory.

In a way, the Sangheili and the pilots of the UNSC weren't so different after all. It was common practice amongst UNSC fighter crews to etch kill tallies into the side of their craft; the more you had, the more respect you got. One of the rumours making the rounds ad nauseam around every pilot quarters in the fleet, was that the more kills you got, the more likely you'd get a pay bonus at the end of the year... strangely, no one Rhys knew had ever managed to find out whether it was true or not. The Sangheili? Well, everyone knew that their whole military ranking system was developed around the number of kills they made.

He glanced up, then rolled the craft so he could look down " or up, considering his new perspective of the matter " at the moon.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked the woman behind.

"I'm thinking it's a bad idea." she responded, "But since when did my opinion stop you? Go ahead and do it anyway."

To her: "Thanks." To everyone else: "Follow us! Let's go down where there's some action!"

Someone, Rhys didn't recognise the voice, gave a snort. Regardless, the other three UNSC strike craft followed " with a certain amount of understandable hesitancy from Gryphon 2. Iras tagged a number of undamaged Sentinel portals, sent duplicates of the data to the other craft, and each one peeled off to tackle its own objectives. Assuming the Sangheili didn't get there first. But then, the job would still be done, and that was far more important than Divinity 1's _challenge_.

It didn't take long for things to start going wrong. The Sabre plunged into the ravine formed by a pair of long, six story buildings, and immediately ran afoul of an Enforcer popping up from who knew where and peppering its shields with pulse beam bursts. Rhys cursed and neatly flipped over it, only to find himself faced with another. _Figures. Down by the surface, and the ground specialists rule._ Hoping to destroy the blighter, he slammed on the airbrake (which worked, so clearly there was air here now), released just one of his Medusa missiles and followed it with his eyes.

It never hit. Because, bursting from a narrow side street amidst a shower of sparks from where the flight nacelles had been scraping the wall, a Space Banshee dropped a long stream of plasma into its unprotected port side. The missile, slow to arrive, passed straight above the dropping hunk of wreckage, and harmlessly impacted a the side of a building (if you can count shattering twenty windows _harmless_). Rhys was almost pleased... except then he noticed the HUD label attached to the craft happened to read _Divinity 3_. Then he was _not_ pleased.

"What? He stole my kill!"

"I thought we _weren't_ taking part in that stupid competition!"

Scowling, Rhys threw his craft into pursuit of the Banshee as it veered off down another metal canyon " a canyon that quickly became a tunnel as it dived underground. A thought hopped into his mind, sitting at the front where it couldn't be ignored. _Okay, Maybe this was a mistake_. But then, now was no time to be having doubts, so he focussed on sticking as close to the darting green Sangheili craft as possible.

It nimbly weaved through a tangle of pylons and gantries, twisting and turning, sometimes even pivoting on the fly as it sought another target. Whichever alien was piloting that thing must have had a charmed life, because amongst all this distracted spinning, he didn't hit one hazard. Even when an Enforcer popped its front end from a side hatch, the Banshee just" twisted over it. Rhys promptly took

the opportunity to bag the machine, taking the hatch out as well. Unfortunately, plenty more fish in the sea, and plenty more hatches to come. The tunnel came to an end in what Rhys could only guess was an underground marshalling yard, two tunnel exits (not counting the one they'd just emerged from) opening out into the considerably sized circular chamber. Nearly the rest of its walls were pocked with Sentinel deployment hatches, which wereâ€| living up to their name. These weren't the Sentinel hatches found on a small scale in deployment facilities, no, these were huge industrial affairs each turning out the annoyingly persistent machines by the score. And every time one opened, you could catch a glimpse of something else behind the emerging drones â€" fires, machinery, all sorts of industrial garbage.

"Sentinel production facility!" Iras called, as if he hadn't worked that one out already. He remembered the briefing on such affairs â€" these were supposed to be mass production facilities capable of turning out vast numbers of machines to combat Flood outbreaks â€" and invaders from space â€" as efficiently as possible. Some, such as those found on Delta Halo, were aerial affairs where only Flood occupied Banshees, Pelicans etc. were supposed to be able to reach. Others, such as the example recorded on Onyx, were undergroundâ€| and so was this one. Maybe following Divinity 3 had been a good idea after all!

...Curious how such a previously unnoticed location can fill up so quickly. Emerging from one of the other entry points, a pair of Phantom Gunboats with Seraph escort. They didn't waste any time, fanning out to eliminate as many hatches as they could. About the same time, Gryphons 2 and 12 appeared out of another, tailed by another Seraph pack, all splitting off to do as much damage as they could.

"Rhys!" Iras shouted.

"In a moment..." he responded, not taking his eyes off Divinity 3 as he continued to stick to its tail. Another Super Sentinel appeared in front of the Banshee, choosing exactly the wrong time to emerge from its hatch, and managed to look surprised. The Banshee launched a fuel rod round... and momentarily ceased to move when the Sentinel detonated way in advance of the pulsing round actually connecting.

"Now we're even." Rhys commented, taking his finger off the autocannon trigger and making his Sabre scarce before the Banshee's pilot figured out just what had happened.

"Are you done playing yet?" came a smouldering voice from the seat behind.

No answer, because Rhys was back to hatch destruction. Hatches that weren't going down without a fight, hatches that insisted on each releasing a day's worth of machines in a matter of seconds. Another swarm of Medusa missiles (and Rhys saw with shock that he only had another three such swarms left) cleared the airspace around a nearby Phantom, which took advantage of the sudden breathing space to do two things â€" first, it roasted the Enforcer trying to bag Templar 1 from behind as way of settling the debt, and then it turned all of its considerable firepower (bar the back auto turret which couldn't track that far) on the three hatches directly in front of it. End

result, three less annoyance spewing problems.

"_Got a minute, Templar 1?_ _Only, I've got a few problems over hereâ€¦|_"

A "few problems" was somewhat understating the situation, for when Rhys turned to face the distant Longsword that was Gryphon 12, it was under fire from a few dozen Sentinels at once, each doing its level best to slice the beleaguered fighter in two. For now, the UNSC fighter was just managing to keep them at bay by dropping its remaining Moray mines one by one and hoping the pursuit force would plough straight into them. They stubbornly refused to do any such thing, opting instead to spear each mine moments after it emerged. And then a far oversized Enforcer pushed its way to the front and just relied on curiously powerful shields to see it safe as it bulldozed its way through the explosive gifts.

"_What the hell is that thing made of?_" screamed Gryphon 12, releasing all of his remaining mines at once â€" to no better purpose than send the Enforcer's shields a lovely shade of cherry red.

"Hold on, G. 12, I'm inbound."

The Enforcer let loose with another pulse beam scattering, pingping off Sentinel and Longsword armour alike, and wrecking the paint job of the latter. The pilot failed to spew the customary moan, realising that things could have been much worse. And could still be, because the Enforcer was now trying its luck with mortars.

"_Templar 1, where the hell are you?_"

Some of the Sentinels twisted to the side, suddenly aware of a new threat closing rapidly from the side. Too little, too late, and their efforts only brought them a passing glance from the rampaging Sabre slamming into their midst, knocking countless machines away even as it walked autocannon fire and another Medusa salvo across the back of the mammoth Enforcer. It took the hint and began to plunge downwards, trailing smoke and flames.

"Right here. The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

â€¦|

"_Did you __**really**__ just spew out that tired old line?_"

"Since when has he been imaginative in the speech department?" Iras (rather unfairly, Rhys thought) responded for him.

The Sabre fell back into formation with the Longsword, both of them laying down a withering fire on another set of machines harassing another Gunboat.

"Where's Gryphon 2?"

There was a reluctant pause, which Rhys took at first to be thanks to another outgoing ventral gun barrage against the next foe to rear its head â€" yet another Enforcer, but a regularly sized one this time.

"_Gone. We'd just cleared out every hatch around a good sixth of this

place, and the Sentinels didn't seem to appreciate that. We tried to fight back, but they sliced G. 2 to ribbons. That's when I called for help._"

Rhys shuddered. If he'd been just a little more aware of his comrades instead of settling that little dispute with Divinity 3, maybe he could haveâ€| no, no good dwelling on it now. Such were the vagaries of war. You never knew just when Death would swing his scythe at someone, or at who, you just had to keep going and do your best to make him miss.

On that thoughtâ€|

Another Seraph, wreathed in flame, slammed past and kamikazed into another knot of opponents, destroying itself in the process. _Death, glory, or both_ thought Rhys sardonically, watching another dying Seraph do the same. A thought came to him.

"Where's Templar 10?"

"_Still outside, amusing herself with the rest of the Elite pack_.
Where we should be; how many hatches to go?"

"About another fifteen," answered Iras, "No, wait, make that twelve. The Seraphs may be dropping like flies, but the Gunboats at least know to keep going."

One of the two Gunboats veered into view, scorched and blackened and visibly sparking where Sentinel beams had penetrated its thick green shell. One of the plasma turrets on the port side hung limply, the rear was missing entirely. Nonetheless, it still managed to face another surviving hatch and blow it straight to kingdom come.

The surviving Sentinels in the area were _not_ amused. As one they turned their beams on the damaged culprit, and sliced into it. Despite Rhys and the Longsword at his side pouring on the power in a doomed attempt to reach the Phantom in time, they were unable to do anything but watch the Sangheili vessel literally fall apart in mid-air.

"You were saying?"

The other Phantom roared overhead, pulling out all the stops and raining so much plasma in the Sentinel's direction that you could almost be forgiven for thinking that the wrath of god had comeâ€| but then, what is it they say about the man who holds the gun? Or the alien in charge of the plasma turrets in this case? Needless to say, nothing emerged from that aftermath to try a little retaliation in payment forâ€| retaliation. That isn't to say that nothing emerged, no, plenty of things emerged to make life in the pilot of Divinity 3's boots difficult at least â€" a nice load of shrapnel for the Banshee passing below to dodge.

CLANG!

â€|

"What was that?" Rhys asked Iras, the Banshee dodging away having suffered a minor impact but little more. Whoever the pilot was, he had a charmed life.

"What was what?"

"Nothingâ€|" _Maybe I imagined it_â€|

A moment later he found out otherwise, twisting the control stick and finding the Sabre wasn't quite asâ€| agile as it used to be. Instead of looping gracefully round the Phantom, passing the Longsword on the way as it looped the other way round, he, uh, slammed into the Longsword's side.

"_Templar 1, what are you playing at?_"

"I'm not!" Rhys answered just as irritably, "I seem to have picked up a little extra weight."

"_What?_"

â€|

"_Oh, I see. Sentinel, clamped to the fuselage just behind the cockpit._"

There was a mild shriek from behind, Iras for once losing her cool as she turned and found a metal face and glowing eye staring right at her.

"_Oh, it's not __**that**__ bad, the blighter's lost his weapon. Hold on, I'll get the bugger off_."

The Longsword dropped out of flank position (literally dropped, as in, vertically downwards), and reappeared moments later out near the Gunboat which was still blowing Sentinels away with gleeful abandon. Swooping inwards, it opened fire with a single ventral gun round, blowing the Sentinel clean away. Rhys was not sad to see _that_ resultant fireball.

"_Everything all right now?_ _Controls working properly? No more imminent intimate collisions?_"

Just to check, he did a quick aileron roll. Yep, all working fine againâ€| _good_, because the next Sentinel beam massacre was aimed at him! Well, him and that other Phantom, which did a surprisingly agile tumble out of harm's wayâ€| since when could Phantoms do that anyway? Wasn't that supposed to be the province of Banshees?

Mimicking the motion, Rhys flipped his own craft to escape. One Medusa salvo (_just one left!_) into the heart of the Sentinel cloud, and a flurry of Seraphs flying past put paid to what was left. Rhys twisted the Sabre around again, deciding not to let the machines come to him, and instead take the offensive for once. Minor problem, the Sangheili had already finished down here. All hatches blown or otherwise sealed (such as the few blocked by burning Enforcers that had chosen the wrong time to exit), all machines bar that one in the distance downedâ€| and then, so was that, as Divinity 3 got onto its tail and nailed it.

"If you're thinking about that little competition," Iras remarked in a snide fashion, "You lost about five minutes ago. You wouldn't believe how busy that Banshee's been."

A torrent of static came over the comm., roughly dispelling any comeback Rhys might have had.

"Hold on, I'll clear that up."

Rapid tapping against her fold out keyboard clicked its way forward, as Iras worked her magic. It didn't take long.

"There we are. Sorry for the incomprehensible bits, there's only so much this equipment can do." With one last tap, she sent the whole message straight to his earpiece.

"_Templar 10 to **#plar 1; are you done sleeping down *#*whatever bolthole you've *##*#*ared into? We need your help up here!_"

Rhys looked up. The Sangheili were already moving, the seven surviving Seraphs forming up on the Phantom and tearing as fast as the Gunship could go for the nearest exit. Divinity 3 inexplicably took up the lead position, never mind the lack of armour. Gryphon 12 turned too, banking as steep as possible in order to latch onto the rearmost Seraph's tail.

"_Coming?_"

Rhys let his actions do the talking, mimicking the Longsword's manoeuvre and parking the Sabre behind a Seraph flanking the Gunboat on the right. Together, the entire pack charged into the tunnel and straight up it, towards the distant glimmer of a galaxy lit cityscape. Every so often one of the Sabre's fell behind slightly to polish off a hatch, providing the overactive banshee missed it, which wasn't often. Rapidly, the tunnel exit approached. One last gantry blocking the way, a great tear through the middle where the Sangheili had blown their way through passing _in_, and the Phantom melted the rest of it, preventing the necessity of breaking formation.

This proved the _wrong_ thing to do. Why? Well, the Sangheili and two UNSC hangers on were left bunched upâ€| and easy prey for the pack of Enforcers dropping into the tunnel entrance from above.

"_BREAK, BREAK!_" screamed Gryphon 12, rather unnecessarily. And then he screamed again, for entirely different reasons â€" being the most heavily armed target that _wasn't_ a Phantom, the Longsword was naturally one of the first things the Enforcers concentrated on. And it didn't have shields. The Longsword was blanketed by an oncoming storm of mortars, hemmed in so it couldn't evade, and obliterated. Blown apart at the seams. Not that Rhys had much chance to dwell on the loss of _another_ four comrades, because he was too busy dodging himself. The Phantom surged forward, ramming the Enforcers directly in its path and shoving them aside. Each of the Seraphs, and the single Sabre, hurriedly split off and attempted to force their way through their own little gaps in the Forerunner formation. Some of them made itâ€| many didn't. By the time Rhys twisted his craft on its side and wing walked through a gap with half a metre to spare on either side, all but three of the Seraphs had fallenâ€| and so had Divinity 3. The Banshee pilot's luck had finally run out.

"_Templar 1, where are you?_" screeched Templar 10's pilot, her Sabre looping into view around a distant trio of curious, linked skyscrapers. Beam turrets slashed out at her from the towering

edifice, and the depressingly few Sangheili fighters still airborne were all embroiled in their own fights and unable to assist.

"On my way. Where's the rest of the pack?"

"_Why don't you figure that out for yourself, you
__**idiot**__!_"

If this hadn't been the thick of combat, and if Templar 10 had not been so justifiably angry at the moment, Rhys would have reprimanded her for insubordination. But this was, she was, and he didn't. No longer having to worry about keeping pace with a Longsword, he activated the afterburners and pushed the Sabre to its limits. Behind, the Phantom finally fell, victim of another one of those super Enforcers dropping in and blasting it from the rear. What Seraphs were still darting around back there wheeled for compensation and got themselves wiped out as well.

"Rhys, you do know where we're heading, don't you?"

"Not now, Iras, we've lost the rest of the squadron, we're not losing 10 as well!"

The Sabre skimmed across the moon's surface, keeping low and out of the way of the increasing Sentinel numbers swarming up above. This was a wide, mostly open area, with only the odd triple skyscrapers thrusting upwards at regular intervals. Here and there, knots of combat still raged on; the odd Seraph squadron or Phantom Gunboat refusing to go down, even as the odds turned all the more appallingly against them. Most of the combat was centred on the skyscrapers, which fought back with large arrays of beam turrets. Far beyond them, and presumably getting close to the _Spirit of Fire_ considering its proximity to the ground, the _Flame of Conviction_ was under fire itself.

"_Stuff this for a lark. Templar 1, I'm going to make a break for the
__**Conviction**__; you coming?_"

"Go for it Rhys. Do you _really_ _think_ we can win against fifteen dreadnoughts?"

What? Rhys looked again at the towers and realised with a jolt that Iras was right. _Not_ skyscrapers, _docked starships_. That explained the hideously effective beam turrets covering them, and why there was so little else on the ground around here. Would you build on a starship launch field, where the unfortunate structures would be frequently blasted by the exhaust of launching ships? No, thought not. He swore, and swerved his fighter away from the nearest dreadnought, onto a course that would hopefully intercept the _Conviction_ without too much trouble.

"_Afterburners at maximum, making my run for it. You following?_"

The only answer Rhys gave was a simple "yes". The Sangheili, too, appeared to have realised that the battle was hopeless, and the wiser ones (i.e., the ones _not_ of the opinion that running from a lost battle was dishonourable) were beginning to disengage or at least, trying to. A Seraph attempted to fall in behind Rhys, and misjudged, ploughing into the ground instead with the horrible result of

crushing the cockpit outright. Two Space Banshees got away from the dreadnought they'd unsuccessfully been trying to carpet bomb, only to run headlong into a waiting Super Sentinel, welcomed with (what else) a Sentinel beam through the cockpits. The only Phantom to make a break for it was fortunate enough to evade the beams sent to swipe it down, but wasn't so lucky when the nearest dreadnought launched a guided plasma torpedoâ€|

Ahead, Templar 10. Coaxing the last bit of speed from his own struggling afterburners, Rhys managed to pull alongside the other, badly scorched Sabre. Wing to wing, they flashed across the starship launch field, leaving any Forerunner machines trying to tag them in the dust. Above, a pitiful number of surviving Seraphs formed into fractured formations, the last pair of Banshees being forced to constantly boost just to keep up. Ahead, at the boundary between spaceport and what seemed from this distance to be an industrial zone, the Sentinels were waiting for them.

"Last Medusa salvo in the air!" Rhys called, hoping against all hope that they would hit something and force a gap for him to punch through. Templar 10 launched another of her own, backing it up with an autocannon smattering that did nothing but irritate the battered line of Enforcers. And on the scopes, the Sangheili strike craft formation clashed with the Sentinels aboveâ€| and both forces shattered.

"_Debris, debris!_"

Flung through the air a dazzling speed by an exploding Seraph as it collided with the Super Sentinel _deliberately_ blocking its path, debris landed all around his Sabre, allowing Templar 10 to get a small lead on him. Marginally ahead, the missiles impacted and threw Enforcers aside. Always quick to loop through a gap, Templar 10 saw the opening and took it, Rhys slightly behind. Together, they charged into the industrial zone (slowing down _slightly_), swerving every gantry and crane they could and destroying anything else in their way. With one exception â€" a single Phantom Gunboat on crowd control that had somehow got itself separated from the rest of the Sangheili forces earlier. They just dived under that one, giving it a clear view of the pursuit force boiling after them. Any human would have taken the opportunity to follow the fleeing Sabre's at that point, but Sangheili think differently, and it turned to face the opposition instead. Whoops. Barely had the Sabre's turned the next corner and got themselves a nice long, _clear_ run towards the _Conviction_ when a flash from behind signalled its destruction.

"_Come on Templar 1, sanctuary just ahead!_"

â€|Sanctuary.

â€|What sanctuary smokes from where constant beam fire have gashed their way into the hull? Even the Sangheili B-pilots had mostly fallen to the constant pressure, and now the cruiser had run out of fighters to launch. Barely two hundred metres from the ground, and the questing beams doubled in numberâ€| no tripled. And then quintupled, until _hundreds_ of beams were tearing the ship apart.

"RHYS!"

An Enforcer appeared right in front of the Sabre, pulse beams already firing, tearing through the shields, fuselage and all. The starboard engine detonated, the portside moments later. Rhys swore, the canopy blasted away as Iras activated her eje-

###

_UNSC Krakatoa class supercarrier Wings of Eternal Virtue,
Bridge_

"Commander, the _Conviction_!"

Hicker gazed in horror at the view on the holotank, the footage from Templar 10. A flash of light from behind the camera signalled the demise of something following, but that wasn't what held his attention.

The _Flame of Conviction_, was going down. Beams, blue and orange, were slicing into it from all angles. The few Sangheili strike craft left, mere dots on an already grainy screen, attempted one last counterattack, and failed miserably. Behind them, the beams converged, slicing towards the rear of the ship and boring right through the hull-

â€|The cruiser's engines exploded.

For a long moment, the battlecruiser just hung there, seemingly defying gravity even as the rear portion of the ship ceased to exist. And then, it fell, smashing to the groundâ€|

The camera view vanished, the Sabre victim of collision with a Sentinel that had just planted itself straight in its way. Ug returned his image to the projector, looking grim.

"There's bad news, and there's worse news." he said. "That was the bad news, and this is the worse newsâ€|"

The holotank returned to displaying an image of the moon. A close up, a wide flat, metal plain, familiar shapesâ€| billows of smoke. Large objects beginning to move skywards on columns of fire.

"We need to pull back. The Dreadnoughts are launching."

###

****Unit Profile: Rhino Servicer****

A Solar Wind deployed unit, intended to support ground forces. They carry varying equipment, more intended to keep other units combat capable for as long as possible than to actually engage in combat themselves. As such, they carry advanced sensor and communication gear, and are also capable of resupplying vehicles while in the field. This function includes a small scale bullet manufacturing capability, but further details are unknown.

Physical Appearance:

A six wheeled vehicle with a sloping front. The top generally carries antennae and a small radar dish, or other sensor/communication based equipment. Such weapons that it has are mounted towards the front,

and can be stored inside the body until required. Portions of the vehicle on the upper surface appear to be covered by solar panels, however this has not been verified. The nose also conceals a powerful floodlight system.

Armament and Defences:

-Two quad barrelled, rotating machine guns, one per side of the vehicle.

-A single turret of unknown purpose found front and centre.

It should be noted that, while no other armaments have been seen, the Rhino Servicers of Razgriz, Espada, Pixy and Rigel teams have been known to launch small green energy mortars, as well as make use of sniper grade laser systems. Assuming one is the anomalous turret, it is unknown where the remaining weapon can be found.

The Rhino Servicer only carries light armour, but is also protected by an extremely efficient energy shield â€" this is known to be penetrable by a SPARTAN laser.

Dimensions

Width: Approximately two metres.

Height: Slightly under two metres.

Length: Approximately 4.5 metres.

###

-Next Phase: Lament of the Lost

13. Phase 13: Lament of the Lost

****Halo Genetics****

(A/N: Sorry this chapter took so long, it pretty much flung me into a writer's block period trying to get it at least ****passable****. But in celebration of Halo 4 being released today, I've managed to get it complete ****and****_ have another all but done. I'll upload that one tomorrow_. I'm still not entirely happy with this one, but if I decided that if I didn't move on soon, my sanity would probably go walkabout... Enjoy... when you all get off Halo 4 anyway!)_

Disclaimer: â€|Actually, apart from the universe and the Forerunners/UNSC/Covenant in general, this chapter's content is all mineâ€| in theory anyway. So, sorry lawyers, but no Blade, Scimitar or Solar Wind pinching! And the same goes for named characters and used localesâ€| but anything else ****343 Industries****_ is welcome to, and probably rightfully owns already.

â€|With one exception. One line specifically refers to Peter F. Hamilton's workâ€|

****Phase 13: Lament of the Lost****

Balance - Surface (Archon Occupation Day 6, mid morning (Sector 16 time))

There was a curious lack of... shall we say _security_, on the surface of Balance. Amongst the criss-crossing freight transit lines, now bustling with motion with the cessation of actual invasion, behind the buildings humming with the activities of Constructors busily assembling various delicate dreadnought components, hidden in the ducts still releasing the moon's limited atmosphere that had, by necessity, been held in compressed storage for Slipspace transit, another invasion was quietly taking place.

...One more tiny, four legged shape scuttled behind the back of a dozy Enforcer and all but jumped down the next ventilation duct. A stroke of luck, finding this little subterranean passage network. Safe and secure, only Constructors (and mechanical Solar Wind pilots - but _that_ was hardly a deliberate design feature) could fit down here, and the vents ran the entire length and breadth of the planet. With vents popping up at regular intervals, all in all, a perfect way to sneak about.

...Until the whole network was sealed off, as it would be when the atmosphere was fully released from storage. And that would be... in about three hours. Plenty of time to get back to the _Spirit of Fire_ launch bay, but not much else.

Blip reached the next junction, and unhesitantly turned left. Every two steps of its tiny, pointy feet, it released an ultrasonic "ping", all the while using the rebounding sonar waves to construct a real time map of the route ahead. If bats could do it, so could mechanical pilots - who cared about the lack of lights?

Another junction, a left turn this time. According to the sonar map, another few turns would just about put Blip under the nose of the downed Sangheili cruiser. A few blocks beyond _that_ and it would reach the nearest vent exit to the _Spirit_. The Sangheili had got close... but not close enough. Especially when they'd been chasing a lie, a siren song.

...And, turning another corner, Blip ran straight into another one.

If there was one thing Solar Wind pilots lived... or rather (seeing as they technically weren't living) _existed_ for, it was information. Arguably, because seeking out information was a key part of a reconnaissance force, the obsession had been deliberately hard wired into them. And so, on Balance as on any other new world, Blip and the rest of the pilots were poking their non-existent noses into every curiosity to come their way. A bit of a mistake; there were a _lot_ of them.

...Somehow, Blip thought that shimmering cracks crossing the entire breadth of the four metre wide vent, passing straight through the _air_, weren't _supposed_ to be on that list.

Blip eyed the crack suspiciously. It eyed the walls. It even, in the interests of being thorough, eyed the little pile of Constructor wreckage sitting within spitting distance of the crack, gently dissolving from contact with the surrounding pool of yellow gloop. No, expecting some form of quantum rupture generator hidden in that

lot was perhaps a _little_ on the side of paranoia.

The crack, the _quantum rupture_, rippled and spat something out. More gloop, and a little chitinous ball to be precise.

...

With a nasty sounding, frantic chitter, the ball uncurled itself, spasmed violently, and succumbed to the rarified air. Blip watched it go limp, waited until it was sure the creature was dead, and scuttled over for a look. Single eye scanned the creature quickly, other electronic senses watching warily for signs of the crack preparing to eject anything else.

It was a bug. An oversized, vaguely beetle shaped bug of dark coloration, sporting two giant curving pincers. Even discounting these, it was some fifteen centimetres from one end of the smooth, gently sloping armoured shell to the other. Another pair of pincers, smaller, almost vestigial, protruded from the back end. And... there was something else. As the pilot looked on, it noticed parts of the creature... fluctuating. Fading into misty travesties of former selves, before snapping back to full glory in a split second. It wasn't a side effect of being flung through the rupture, so... was it biological? An inherent trait of the creature run wild with the spasms of death?

What is this thing? thought Blip, confused. _It isn't in my databanks..._

Curiosity, they say, killed the cat. "They", fail to say just what it did to the nosy Solar Wind pilot that foolishly stuck its nose into a quantum rupture. Perhaps it got eaten. Perhaps, it was merely sucked through and trapped on the other side. Perhaps, it simply ceased to exist... or perhaps, _none of the above_. Whichever antiquated spider pilot was foolish enough to do it last, the only thing that came to Blip was the sensation of long, swaying grass, red as rust. Of large insects crawling all over the place. Of large, indistinct shapes drifting overhead. _Of yellow, __**corrosive**__ venom dripping from bug jaw parts._

Blip leapt backwards, shocked to see the crack fluctuating, gaining and loosing ground in continuing sequence. After an uncomfortably long ten seconds that may as well have been a decade, the motion calmed. Deceptively so, because quantum ruptures weren't _ever_ _stable_. And they rarely lasted this long, the unnatural rifts sealing themselves as if they had never been... if you waited long enough.

...Something was wrong here. Something was _very_ wrong. Blip slowly, cautiously backed up, reached the corner, and ran for it. It would have to find an alternative way back to the _Spirit..._

###

_UNSC Krakatoa class supercarrier Wings of Eternal Virtue â€" Bridge (Archon Occupation, Day __6, mid morning (Sector 16 time))_

You never truly understood the phrase "weary to the bone" until you'd experienced the condition yourself. Commander Hicker, was now in that very state.

The short battle had delivered shock after shock, all crammed into a single short hour. The discovery of the moon's unnatural composition. The Strato and Super Sentinels tearing through armour and shields alike, battle scars venting atmosphere, materials and flailing bodies. The descent of the Flame of Conviction in its senseless attempt to reach the Spirit of Fire as beams of flame reached up to claw its underbelly. And then, an image forever etched into his mind; the Sangheili cruiser's engines detonating, and its brief, unstoppable plummet to the moon's metal surface.

Sangheili cruisers wereâ€¦ to see one brought low with such ease was nearly impossible to believe. But when the evidence of your eyes was so insistent, when the memory would be with you for a lifetime, how could you not accept the truth of the matter? As much as the knowledge bought bile to Hicker's throat, a nearly invincible (by human standards) Covenant ship had fought its last. In the aftermath of its death, the three remaining ships had managed to regroup and flee â€” the Sentinels inexplicably letting them go with only half hearted resistance. Scaring them off? Was that the message? Go, and tell your pitiful allies that this Installation is here to stay, will not tolerate any trespasses_?

If so, it was one that had to be ignored. The flotilla had come to rescue a ship, and had succeeded only in losing one more. Attempting another retrieval was out of the question, especially now that the Forerunner dreadnoughts had reached orbit. And yet, the matter could not be closed. The Flame of Conviction must lay where it had fallen â€” its hull cracked and engines destroyed, even if the ship still looked mostly intact. But within the crippled hulk, there were survivors. Nal 'Vataee had even managed to contact them for a few, brief minutes, just long enough to tell the surviving warriors â€” Sangheili, human and auxiliary alike â€” to fortify their position. Or, if that wasn't possible, to venture out and find some other hole toâ€¦ hole up in.

Eventually, they would be rescued. One way or another, the troops on the surviving ships would come up with a viable rescue plan, even if it meant calling in a veritable armada of Sangheili and human ships for a sheer brute force approach. But until then, the stranded only had one, simple objective. To survive.

Ug shimmered into view on his holotank, the caveman simulacrum making a great show of looking around before turning to face the commander. He opened his mouthâ€¦ and hesitated, clearly reluctant to interrupt Hicker's dark thoughts.

"What is it Ug?"

"We have anâ€¦ anomaly."

Hicker's head came up, gazing at the main viewscreen. The picture, still sweeping across the distant moon at the highest magnification possible, didn't seem to be focusing on anything in particular. Still tracing its systematic way back and forth, highlighting regular blobs of Forerunner starships yet to launch, but precious else of distinguishable size.

Ug sighed. "No, nothing from the Forerunnersâ€¦ at least, I don't think so. The short of the matter is that I'm picking up a

transmission, not an automated beacon this time, originating from the area of space to the left of the moon. Andâ€¦ it's using UNSC encryption."

That brought Hicker's head round. "UNSC? Who?"

"Iâ€¦ don't know. I've tried scanning the transmission's source vector, but there's nothing to see. Not even the tell tale shimmer of active camouflage, or the emissions void of a prowler."

"Infinity class maybe? Maybe the _Eternity_ passed our message on and Earth sent reinforcements."

Ug... delayed his answer, looking uneasy about something.

"...Unlikely Sir. We couldn't get in touch with HIGHCOM at the best of times, and I have no reason to believe the Infinity class would have better luck. Which leaves us just two options."

Hicker knew. Either another lost UNSC ship had somehow got out here, not to mention picked up some hither unknown stealth technologyâ€¦ or this was another trap - someone had got ahold of classified UNSC encryption codes. Not easy, unlessâ€¦ no, Ug would have mentioned if they'd been outdated.

Unfortunately, there was only way to get to the truth.

"Accept the call."

Ug didn't bother arguing, his smart AI mind had no doubt come to the same conclusion. His simulated face furrowed briefly in concentration, and a small voiceprint display materialised on the commander's personal viewscreen. A red light appeared alongside, and quickly changed to green, signaling the connection was active. All around Hicker, the bridge crew stiffened, diverting the majority of their attention his way.

The caller didn't waste any time, jumping straight in with a cool, feminine and faintly artificial voice.

"_Well, you really made a mess of that one didn't you?"

"What? Who is this?" _That does__** not**__ sound like a Forerunner Monitor._

"_Solar Wind augmented surveillance force HALO 4. More specifically, Ward 0A, pilot one of G. Sentinel. The identity of my superiors would mean nothing to you, so I'll leave that unsaid_."

â€¦Hicker looked at Ug, who shrugged.

"â€¦Andâ€¦ where are you? We can't find you on sensors."

"_Well of course you can't; we're bouncing the signal off a ComPro â€¦" communications probe â€¦" we dropped earlier. Don't bother looking for it, it's too small for Krakatoa grade sensors to pick up. You'll be able to see us though. Train them on vector you 2 + 0_."

Ug did so, bringing up a view of the targeted area on the main

viewscreen. A distant blob, floating against the backdrop of the planet and enveloped in a hazy golden light. Ug magnified and enhanced the image, revealing the elusive transmitter.

Drifting at the centre of a golden prism generated by a number of tiny drones positioned at the corners, was a machine that looked somewhatâ€¦ humanoid. Giant robot sort of humanoid, the sort Japanese anime companies had come up with year after year. A stocky frame of a green coloration, highlighted by lines of yellow. A huge disc attached to its back, and a pair of slender weapon tubes attached to each forearm. One hand held an oversized rifle of some sort, while the other was grasping a blocky looking shield. _Definitely anime-esque_.

Flanking the mech on either side, but still within the boundary of that golden prism, a pair ofâ€¦ aircraft? Harriers? Surely notâ€¦ Beyond the flattened nose and shortened fuselage, they wouldn't have looked amiss flying through the skies of Earth, as antique the idea of harriers was. But something warned Hicker to keep his mouth shut. He was sure that there was much more to the craft than met the eye.

Said eyes narrowed.

"So, beyond attempting to insult us, the purpose of this call is?"

"_To establish a few facts. You may be alarmed to know, but you have sorely misjudged the situation_."

"If you mean underestimated the Forerunner-

"_No, we mean __**misjudged**__. There is much more occurring here than you are aware of. For example, you recently engaged Forerunner forces in an attempt to rescue the crew of the __**UNSC Spirit of Fire**__. This was not necessary._"

The other paused, seemingly deliberately giving Hicker a chance to respond. He did; that last comment had struck a nerve.

"How could we? We can't just abandon our lost!"

"_We acknowledge, but our statement remains valid. You followed a Siren song._"

A moment of silence settled, soon replaced by a blanket of despair as the news was digested. But the Solar Wind pilot wasn't done yet.

"_Approximately six days ago, the __**UNSC Spirit of Fire**__ arrived under sub-light drive. Due to a Forerunner engineered EKP - Energy Killer Pulse - field, the crew were forced to abandon ship. They relocated to the planet below, and are currently under threat from the local Monitor. This Monitor is known as Mercurial Wisdom, and suffers from multiple personality disorder. As such, its actions are unpredictable._"

"Wait," Hicker said, voice smouldering just on the side of perceptibility, "You're telling us that we lost a ship _for nothing_?"

"_That is correct. The planet, Installation R-03 Archon as the Forerunners designated it, is ringed by successive ranks of security probes. Any approach, even using the medium of Slipspace, is monitored and acted upon. Prior to your arrival, a transmission from Mercurial Wisdom to Balance - the moon - resulted in the __**Spirit of Fire**__ being carried to Balance by Strato-Sentinels. Subsequently, our units concealed on board reported the EKP field being removed and limited systems returning to functional status. As no humans remained on board by this time, this was a clear attempt by the Forerunner remnant to lure your forces in. This strategy worked._"

"Have you anything _useful_ to tell us?"

The frightening visage of Nal 'Vataee appeared on the Monitor, more furious than Hicker had ever seen him before - and that included the time the Brutes had nearly crippled his ship by shoving a frigate sized _asteroid_ at it. Clearly, he'd been listening in, and when a Sangheili is told that he's just fallen for someone else's deception, heads are soon to be seen a-flying.

"Be brief, _machine_," he growled at whatever the Covenant equivalent of the camera was, intimidating Hicker if not the Solar Wind caller, "I have a hundred score warriors clamouring for vengeance, and they couldn't care less who they bring it against. You have stated an awareness of events as they unfolded; would you have me set them on _you_ for not providing due warning?"

"Shipmaster..." Ug began-

"_Silence_. It is a Sangheili ship lost, and _I_ will deal with this.

"I give you two choices. Leave us to our duty, meddle not in our affairs, and we shall extend the same... courtesy (the Sangheili seemed to have trouble with that word) to you. Or, if you have aid to give, then give it. Do not try our patience with _talk_."

That last word was almost spat at the screen, clearly conveying a sense of fury just barely held in check. And really, who could blame him?

"_Very well. __**UNSC Wings of Eternal Virtue**__, we are transmitting the planetary coordinates of the __**Spirit of Fire**__ survivors. __**Faith through Fury**__, we are attempting to locate a weak point in Balance's defence network suitable to extract survivors from the __**Flame of Conviction**__. Please stand by_."

The connection cut out, leaving one startled human, and one seriously annoyed Sangheili.

"Stand_by?" the latter stuttered. "Those machines stand ready to destroy my stranded warriors, and I am expected to _stand by_?"

Hicker gave what he hoped the Sangheili would interpret as a sympathetic glance.

"I understand your dilemma," he responded carefully, "but do we

really have any choice? You saw what happened to the _Conviction_, and the Forerunners have only fortified their posit-

"I _KNOW, _HUMAN!_"

The Sangheili drew a great breath, visibly trying to bring his emotions under control. Slowly, he calmed.

"Forgive me... I need some time to think."

He severed the connection, leaving Hicker staring at a blank screen.

...

"Commander?"

Now it was Hicker's turn to inhale and steady his nerves. He looked around, noted the quizzical looks of Ug and the bridge crew. He released the breath.

"Alright... We aren't Sangheili - we can't afford to take time off. We came here to rescue our lost comrades of the _Fire_, so we'd better get started.

"All hands, prepare for a support and retrieval operation. Any surviving Pelicans deemed repairable are to be given the highest priority."

He stood up.

"We have already taken casualties in the course of this operation. We shall not let them be for naught!"

###

_Balance - Surface, UNSC Spirit of Fire (Archon Occupation Day __6, late morning (Sector 16 time))_

"_Well, you took your time._"

The ever annoyed, ever _annoying_ Echo turned to face the small pilot lift, as a silent and illogically shuddering Blip rose into the Spider Pilot cockpit of Prism 1. The newcomer took one look around, shook itself like a dog, and wordlessly scuttled to its station.

"..._Don't ask_. " it muttered.

_"If you ran into another quantum rupture; so did the rest of us. They aren't so bad, __**get over it**__!"_

Blip gave a quiet chuckle, one that sounded... wrong. Rampancy sneaking its fingers in? Weren't Solar Wind pilots supposed to be proof against that?

"_Oh, I saw a rupture all right. I saw a whole string of them! The one spewing acid spitting bugs wasn't so bad, not when I was nearly frozen by another and the third threw a legion of doomsday nanomites at my CPU. And if that wasn't bad enough, what do you suppose

happened when I found the one that opened onto __**Hell**_?"

For once, Echo chose not to respond. Even if _its_ rupture experience had involved the other side being uncomfortably close to a black hole. ...And apparently Flare from Prism 3 had found nothing but tropical paradise after paradise, how _sickening_. Just as the oil started to boil, Richochet stirred.

"_So why do we reckon there's so many of the things right now?_"

Echo shot the gunnery specialist a one eyed, mechanical death glare. "_Did you even __**listen**__ to the briefing Ward 1 sent? Perhaps __**you**__ should try moving something as big as a moon through Slip-space, see if you can do it with out damaging the fabric of reality._"

...

"..._Fair enough._"

The conversation died a bit after that allowing Blip to slowly recover from its ordeal. Eventually, electronic thought processes calmed enough for a look at the sensors. The small camera attached to vulcan 2 slowly tracked across the peaceful, all but empty launch bay, taking in the few abandoned spaceworthy UNSC vehicles and scatterings of loose equipment. Not a movement to be seen, even outside where you'd expect to see Forerunner machines cruising by.

...Empty?

"_Where's the rest of Prism team?_"

Richochet answered, butting in before Echo could deliver another obnoxious remark.

"_Gone. Ward team called and gave them the unenviable task of finding ways to help our friends in the Sangheili wreck. Plus, to find an access point to the database, see if there are any other nasty surprises Wisdom hasn't told us._"

"_Technically, it hasn't told us anything anyway. Good thing Razgriz 2A managed to slip some electronic spy bugs into a certain SPARTAN's armour._"

Richochet sneaked a glance sideways, checking Echo was preoccupied.

"..._A little underhanded for my taste, that trick. I'll almost be relieved when that AI finally catches on and deletes them._"

"_**I heard that!**_"

Vibrating with fury, the overly easy to P. off Echo turned a glaring eye at its two associates.

"_The mission comes before __**all**__._" it gouted needlessly. "_Any and all practises that further our understanding can and __**should**__ be taken, no matter what our morals say on the

mat-_"

"_Echo, cool it._"

Echo stared, seemingly lost for words.

"_**What**__?_"

"_I said, __**cool it**__._" Richochet let loose a glare of its own, quite at odds to the traces of weariness in its voice. "_Unless you want to get to the same state of mind as our rogue penal teams. If you don't have morals, you'll do anything without a second thought. Up to and __**including**__ going rogue. And this mission has enough rogues as it is._"

"_...But...But!_"

"_No, no buts, just think about it._"

Richochet swiveled its eye back to facing the gunnery console.

"_In the meantime, we have work to do._"

###

_Balance - Surface, Sangheili ship Flame of Conviction (Defunct)
(Archon Occupation, Day __6, late morning (Sector 16
time))_

"...Owie... Me head hurt."

...What was it with Unggoy and that statement? One, a green armoured heavy weapons specialist, stumbled past Cor with its head in its hands. It wasn't the only one with concussion.

Scattered around the darkened corridors, the survivors of the _Flame of Conviction_'s suicidal charge moaned and groaned. The auxiliary quarters, buried deep within the ship as they were, had held up well compared to certain _other_ areas. Weapon blisters, shield generators, the entire aft section of the ship; all were mangled by beam and devoid of survivors. Only the ship's Command Centre and a scant few other sections had survived relatively untouched, by dint of being too deep for Sentinel beams to penetrate.

Cor raised his snout from the dead Kig-Yar he'd been... okay, let's be honest here, _relieving_ of a few supplies. Water capsules mostly, although a guaranteed non-rigged type 33 guided munitions launcher was a welcome pickup as well. Pity so few crystalline ammunition had survived, but it was a lucky wonder the lost amounts had settled with being crushed to powder when they could have exploded instead.

Another movement, a scuttling form to Cor 's left. He scowled, unable to pretend that the spindly shape looting a poor Unggoy's corpse of anything _remotely_ valuable was someone other than it was. _Tas. Makes sense __**he'd**__ survive. The afterlife won't want to let him in any sooner than it has to either..._

Sick at the mere thought of the other Kig-Yar, Cor finished his unpleasant business and skedaddled for the pair of human flashlights

he could see sweeping the gloom. Donald and Kevin. He was, in a most un-Kig-Yar manner, pleased they'd survived. Their constant... what did they call it? Trash talking? Yes, that was it... Was a constant welcome distraction from the current grim state of affairs.

"Oy, Frank! Where are you, split lip?"

The Sangheili in question... didn't materialise. A low growling did, origin lost amongst the haze of smoke.

"Typical. The one spawn of the Sanghelios Satan who I can stand to look at, and he's off with his hooves up again."

The growling cut off, replaced with a sort of... perplexed silence. Cor suppressed a grin, scrambling over a pile of twisted metal to reach them.

"You know," he quipped conversationally, "one day he'll realise that his translator isn't playing up, and..." He mimed the human gesture of drawing fingers across the throat. The accompanying sound was... difficult, so he didn't even bother trying. Nonetheless, the marines got the message.

"...You know," Donald slowly responded, "jolly good sports the Elites. Fine sense of humour. Never ones to take offence at triviali-"

The distinctive snap-hiss of an energy sword lighting up was a good incentive for both marines to jump. They looked around nervously, apparently expecting to find the blade swinging in their direction. Luckily for both their sakes, it turned out the wayward stealth Elite was merely using it as an impromptu wire cutter, freeing... oh no... that Sangheili Major who'd been harassing them earlier. Released from the tangle of cables that had somehow twisted around him during the crash, the barely able to stand Major sent a "how dare you see me in this state" glare at the watching marines and Kig-Yar before shuffling off in search of the emergency aid station.

Douglas let out a long breath.

"Whew, almost saved Frank some work and died of fright there... What?"

Kevin was looking at him in a strange, curious way.

"You wouldn't... happen to have some British in you, would you?"

"What? No!"

"Just wondering, interesting choice of words just now..."

Cor looked between them, confused.

"...You humans forever baffle me. You do not have our ruthless politics, and yet, you are divided on the strangest things."

"Hey, human politics can be ruthless too!" Kevin paused, looked sideways as if to check only Donald was listening in, and leaned forward conspiratorially. "...And for the record, we humans often

baffle each other as well. Half of the _species_ have me permanently stumped."

"That's not just you, that's every man." Donald responded, kicking a bit of debris away, then crouching to collect the revealed plasma grenade. "At least we know the feeling's mutual."

"Or so they say..."

...

"Could we _please_ get this conversation onto something I understand?"

Both humans jumped, seemingly having forgotten the Kig-Yar was in on the discussion. Kevin, just barely the _more_ amiable of the two (otherwise, to make use of a curious human saying, to a Kig-Yar they were as alike as peas in a pod), gave an... _apologetic_ glance.

"Sorry Corâ€¦"

Unnoticed behind them, Tas had found something of great interest to him. A dead Sangheili yet un-plundered. A Minor, one who had been too low ranked to be afforded the honour of carrying an energy sword, but had _somehow_ bypassed the rule and got himself a Kig-Yar energy _cutlass_. Most satisfactory. He pocketed it, and quietly crept a few doors along the corridor, to what _had_ been the entrance to the quarters he'd shared with Cor. Now the door was jammed shut, but for a Kig-Yar that happened to know where the control override wires were in the wall, and had access to a suitable cutting toolâ€¦

â€¦A couple of minutes later, the Kig-Yar re-emerged with two items back in his possession. One, was obvious â€" a certain Jiralhanae warhammer slung over his back, failing to crush him by dint of the anti-grav bangle. The other item, wellâ€¦ you could tell it was there, but only if you sniffed hard enough.

â€¦Back with the marinesâ€¦

"So what is the point of all this? The food stores were spaced, if we turtle we'll just starve to death."

Kevin's only answer to Donald's quite serious question was to shrug. So Cor, trailing just behind, took up the slack.

"...Well... It may not be for long..."

Both marines stopped dead; Cor didn't.

"...What have you heard?" Donald asked, as Cor extracted his beak from the former's combat fatigues. "You've been watching that Eye-Fi thing of yours again, haven't you?"

"Eye-Hi." Cor absent mindedly corrected, giving his poor beak a rub. "And yes, I have. If you want to know, the survivors on the bridge recieved the message "Stay put. We will come for you"."

Donald looked thoughtful. "Nal 'Vataee or our commander?"

Cor just shrugged, much to his surprise. Apparently he'd been hanging around these humans long enough to start subconsciously adopting their mannerisms.

"...I have no idea." he eventually admitted. "It came after Nal 'Vataee's orders, and was displayed in perfect Covenant and... whatever you said your language was called."

"Wait, so no one actually knows who sent it?"

"That is what I gathered..."

At this moment, the conversation was bluntly truncated by a certain spindly Kig-Yar rudely shoving his way past them, pointedly ignoring the human noises of annoyance in favour of a (quite unprovoked) tooth baring hiss directed at Cor.

"What does it matter?" the newcomer growled. "One way or another, you won't be seeing Eayn again!"

And with another snap, Tas stormed off, taking his warhammer trophy with him. Which meant he missed Cor's quiet response. "Like I'd want to. Wretched hive of a planet..."

...A smell meandered up his long nostrils, cutting him off in favour of thought.

Kevin whistled. "Someone's made an enemy. Want me to do something about it... Cor?"

Cor shook his head.

"...Strange. I thought I smelt... Jiralhanae."

"Brute?" The marines gave each other a confused glance.

"Well, no point worrying about it. We've got other things to think about..."

"Like how we're going to get out of here..."

###

Balance - Surface (Archon Occupation, Day 6, late morning (Sector 16 time))

Desperate times, they say, call for desperate measures.

Normally, the purpose of a covert mission is to avoid notice. Well, that's the theory anyway. But sometimes, to succeed you have to break the rules a little, or at least, bend them. No one ever said that a victor's war was by the rules anyway.

...Which brings us back, again, to Solar Wind and Prism team, who were about to try a rather... drastic approach to sneaking into the Balance information net. Said approach, involved getting in touch with Mercurial Wisdom.

...

Well, someone would be, anyway.

Prism 2, the team's only active Viking Servicer - seeing as Prism 1 was still back on the *Spirit of Fire*, was parked on the metal ground next to what appeared to be a perfectly ordinary office block... except of course, that having no people, Balance needed no offices. So not an office block then, but whatever it was, it held a useful little secret.

From a hole recently drilled in the building's side to a socket on the underside of Prism 2, a cable. Within that hole, a bundle of fibre optics and an illicit, jury rigged tap into the moon's electronic infrastructure.

"_Prism 2 to Ward 1; time to fish._"

High above, relatively ignored by the Forerunner Strato Sentinels cruising by, Ward team had slowly and carefully relocated. They floated in the void, the G. Sentinel mech and accompanying pair of Viking Servicers still protected by that golden shielding prism, now roughly equidistant between the planet and its on again, off again moon. A reasonable place to keep tabs on happenings in both locales.

...And, provided they didn't cause any trouble and kept themselves to themselves, it seemed Tempest was happy to leave them be.

Big mistake. You didn't have to launch a missile to be a nuisance. The lead pilot on board the G. Sentinel, going by the curious unofficial moniker of "Cipher", was about to prove the point.

It opened a comm. channel, a wide band transmission that would blanket a good portion of the Archon network, yet leave the UNSC frequencies alone. It was time to make some noise.

"_Solar Wind pilot Cipher, requesting response from 59point29 Mercurial Wisdom._"

"_What do __**you**__ want?_" the Monitor responded, sounding annoyed. Cipher quickly identified the response frequency and adapted its own signal to match. "_I'm in the middle of something here._"

"_We of Ward team are of the opinion that you may need to be informed of the nature of quantum ruptures. We understand that Balance is suffering an epidemic of them._"

"_None of your business. And if you don't stop interrupting me, one Spartan will be less one smart AI. And I'll be sure to let him know where to place the blame._"

Sensing the other about to cut the connection, Cipher's only option was to get crafty.

"_So you don't want to know. Fine, but don't come crying to us when Balance gets shattered into pieces by them. Don't say we didn't try to warn you when fragments of the moon are pummeling your Installation to rubble._"

"_**What**__?_"

That got you interested, Cipher thought. _Now, to reel the line in._

"_That's what happens when you leave quantum ruptures to keep on occurring. Sooner or later one large enough to wreck a planet forms, and then you're really in trouble_."

"_And I suppose you're just trying to be helpful?_"

...

"_Why do you hate us so much?_"

The reply took some time to come back.

"_I don't. But I... or rather __**we**__ were warned._"

Cipher didn't quite know what to think of that one. Solar Wind was typically quite quiet in its operations; few had long term knowledge of it, and none of them were known to have operations extending into this region. So...

"_Warned by who?_"

...

"_Have you ever heard of an organisation calling itself PENANCE?_"
Wisdom answered with a question of its own.

"_No..._"

"_Well, the warning came from them. "When Spartans come to Archon, be wary of those who follow in their wake. In space, they spy, on ground they destroy. And one of them will be your downfall"._ _So of course all three of us agree that we cannot trust you_."

"_Just as we are supposed to trust an AI with multiple personality diso_-"

"_**How**__ did you learn that? Been talking to the UNSC?_"

...Cipher paused, aware that this delay was maddening for the Monitor. But that wasn't the point. What _was_ the point? Simple, keep Wisdom talking. Because while it was concentrating on _this_, it would (hopefully) be too distracted to notice Prism 2 hacking into the Balance net.

"_Let's just say you aren't the only one who can bug a suit of antiquated armour. By the way, which one of you is talking at the moment? I doubt it is Nocturne for obvious reas_-"

"_It's Solis. Tempest wouldn't even answer. The only reason __**I**__ have is because PENANCE also added "One of them will be your Saviour". And I'd better move. I don't want Tempest waking up and finding what I've got here. It would be the end of her for sure._"

"_And then that Spartan would be coming after
__**you**__?"_

_"Precisely. Now, you seem to have sidetracked me. __**What**__ were
you going to tell me about these "quantum ruptures"?."_

Bother, Cipher thought. _You aren't supposed to be this alert!
You're supposed to be devoting a significant amount of run time to
keeping yourself awake!_

...

Oh well, better make the most of it...

Out of the G-Sentinel's electronic eyes, it watched Archon, working
out the best wording for what it was about to say. Something vague...
It was briefly sidetracked by the appearance of many fast moving
specks in its field of vision - a convoy of UNSC Pelicans with Space
Banshee support - but soon got its thoughts back on track as it
sensed Solis growing impatient.

"_...Do you believe in fragility through absence?_"

"_That depends. Do not attempt to discuss philosophy with me, I deal
only in facts. In that, Tempest and I are very alike._"

"_Says the personality that likened choices to autumn leaves. But
I'll agree that philosophy seems to be Nocturne's department. Very
wellâ€¦_"

It seemed that there was only one way to keep Wisdom distracted. Give
it a passable "truth" and hope the revelation blew the Monitor's
mindâ€¦| so to speak.

"_Another question. Say the subject of Tempest's ire is in fact a
critical part. Say that without its existence, things started to fall
apartâ€¦|_"

"_Get to the point._" the annoyed answer came back.

"_There are other human empires. Bastions of humanity yet
undiscovered by the UNSC or the Covenant. And if we have our way,
never will. In truth, they are the most widely occurring of
species._"

"_And?_"

"_Andâ€¦| They have been disappearing. Completely. Plucked from their
worlds through means yet undetermined, as if they had never
existed._"

"_â€¦|_You believe __**we**__ are responsible?_"

"_No! But_ _it is most curiousâ€¦| This is what we have come to Archon
for. Solar Wind teams have been dispersed across all known space, all
to seek out any information that could lead us to the
cause_-"

"_WHY? What is so important about __**them**__? And what has this to
do with your "quantum ruptures"?_"_

Wisdom's voice had changed. Harsher, less kindly disposed towards Cipher than even Solis had been.

"â€|_Tempest. When did you take over?_"

"_That is __**not**__ important! What are you get-_
**Soliiiiissss!**"

Tempest's voice trailed off in a scream. And a moment later, reappeared, sounding much calmer. Solis was back in control.

"_Good thing I left my sanctuary, orâ€| that could have been nasty. Now, finish what you were saying and be quick. I doubt I'll be able to maintain control much longer._"

This was _bad_ news. Solis was, while hardly friendly (and that was probably justified), at least willing to listen. Tempest was irrational, suspicious of everything, and all the more likely to recognise this as a distraction (even if the discussion was genuine...)

...No use worrying about soon to be spilt milk.

"_We have noticed,_" Cipher continued, "_A direct correlation between the disappearance of the humans, and the number of quantum ruptures. It is probable that the events are linked somehow. While there is no dire_-"

"_And how is this supposed to help me keep Balance intact? I am hardly inclined to believe this tale has consequences on a place humans have only just encountered!_"

"_Quantum Ruptures arise when the fabric of existence is weakened. The exact reason has yet to be determined, but the human situation appears to be linked to this. In answer to your question, Slipspace transition of especially large objects puts additional strain on the locality. To allow it to recover, do not move the moon again and restrict all Slipspace travel for a suitable period._"

Silence. And then...

"_**Illogical in the extreme**__!_" Tempest was back. "_This poorly contrived pack of lies has served no purpose - did you really think that your actions on Balance would go unnoticed?_"

_Oh, __**Shoot**__!_ Cipher hurriedly tried to open a comm. channel to Prism team, to warn them, only to be assailed by static. Jammed!

"_Solis may have been willing to play along and look the other way, but I suffer no such inclination! Meddlers and humans, they may stay where they are!_"

"_You should not persecute them so! Humans in particular should be protected, they are vital to_-"

Tempest chuckled. The insane chuckle of one who has no intention of changing their tune.

"_Pah! I believe your fairy tale even less than I believe the idea that humans are the chosen "Reclaimers". A story, one to admire in its originality, but hardly one to contain even a glimmer of tru-_"

The rant cut off, and not in a good way.

"_On second thought_, " Tempest finally resumed, quieter, "_perhaps I __**should**__ give your theory some credence. If humans are linked to the stability of existence, and by their disappearance the situation worsens, then I should take steps to ease matters. Yes... No one would want to vanish a __**dead**__ human, there would be no point..._"

"_Don't-_"

"_Yes... And I should start with those landing forces. Time to sharpen my new Blades on actual combatâ€|_"

It cut off in a whirlwind of mad laughter, leaving Cipher wondering just how the deranged Monitor personality could twist things so thoroughly. And this without revealing the _true_ nature of the problem.

â€|Prism team would have to fend for itself. There were people to warn.

###

Balance - Surface (Archon Occupation, Day 6, late morning (Sector 16 time))

"â€|_Uh oh._" one of the pilots of Prism 2 muttered. I've just found where our mystery _Vesuvius_ came from."

"_What's so bad about that?_" Hark, the pilot of Prism 3, one of the fighters, asked back.

"_Because it's Intersolar Commonwealth. Prime era, and that means it was carr-_"

Whatever the rest of that sentence was going to be, Hark would never know. Nor would the rest of the Prism team fighters, because at that moment, a sextet of overcharged Sentinel beams sliced their way through the Viking Servicer's shields, and then the Servicer itself.

"_All units break!_"

Hark threw its fighter into motion, executing a rapid one-eighty and bringing the attackers into view. It didn't like what it saw. Blades, three of them. Prism 4 and Prism 5 shot upwards, narrowly dodging the second beam barrage. Hark on the other handâ€|

â€|

"_Where the heck did they come from?_" Prism 5's pilot screeched at Prism 4 (callsign Pike), as the two surviving Peregrine fighters cleared the rooftops, pushed power to their afterburners and rocketed away. "_I thought the Blade was developed on Archon! There's no way

that Monitor could have shipped them up here that fast without Ward team letting us know!_"

Pike didn't answer. It was more concerned with the Strato Sentinels closing in from every direction, an uneven noose getting ready to hang them. Wisdom, it seemed, wasn't taking any chances.

So, a high altitude dash for freedom was clearly out of the question. Peregrine fighters were agile, but they weren't resilient â€" not against beams of the size a Strato Sentinel could summon. So what if gnats were hard to hit? It only needed to happen _once_.

"_Prism 4, with me!_" Prism 5 dived back towards the ground, plunging into a narrow alleyway between buildings. Seeing no other alternative, Pike followed. Sticking to the other Solar Wind fighter's tail like super glue, it weaved a treacherous course the length of the alley, scraping the walls on more than one occasion.

"_You __**do**__ have a plan, right?_"

"_Yes! How about __**get the heck out of here**__?_"

Couldn't argue with that, even if the amount of forward thinking was regrettably minimal. Quickly, anticipating combat, Pike ran through a system checklist.

-Missile Pods â€" ready, current warhead load â€" 8 standard, 3 EMP, 1 shock.

-Machine gun â€" offline, ammo feed damaged. Nanomite repair operation underway.

-Main drive units â€" in use, operating at 86% efficiency.

-Afterburners â€" ready.

-Shielding â€" Online, operational at 60% power. Warning â€" recharge system damaged.

â€|What? Where had that damage come from? Prism 4 hadn't taken any hits from the Blades or Strato Sentinels, soâ€| on a hunch, Pike electrified the outermost armour layer, then called up tail cam. Sure enough, a pair of fried, hitchhiking Constructors spiraled away, one of them trailing a loop of Peregrine wiring.

_No more sabotage from __**you**_.

Ahead, Prism 5 burst from the alleyway into the bright light of the local star, Villein's glare arriving directly as well as reflecting from Archon's seas above. But such thoughts were hardly high on the list of things to contemplate. That honour was given to the Super Enforcer blocking the alleyway opposite, shields already up and rendering a frontal assault pointless. Which meant it was a good thing for the two fugitives that Prism 5 carried different weaponry.

Peregrine fighters usually mounted their main weapons - whatever that happened to be - just forward of their stalk mounted, main drive

units. In the case of Prism 5, long, almost dainty looking tubes swung into position. As thrusters swiveled and forced the craft upwards, each tube emitted a lance of tightly focused violet light that tore into the building above the Enforcer... and began moving. Slicing through the stonework, metal and glass, the Enforcer soon found itself with an additional load of masonry to carry. And as the lasers finished their work and two equally large parts of building crashed onto its back, there was only one way for the Enforcer to go. Down. Just to add insult to injury, Prism 5 promptly bounced on it as it skimmed over the top of the beleaguered machine. Pike preferred not to waste time antagonising simple minded Enforcers, and cleared the dropping Super Enforcer with a more comfortable couple of metres clearance.

This new alleyway was even worse than the last. The width was nothing to complain about - it could hold the considerable bulk of a Super Enforcer, but the amount of building jutting into their path at irregular intervals, not to mention all the piping crossing between them at higher floors, was just stupid. Then they passed a floor embedded Sentinel hatch - the apparent origin point of that Enforcer, and the alleyway clutter got worse. At least it was only a short alley after that, but still...

"_Prism 4; Quarry, Lantern, Zapper._"

"_Prism 4 copies._"

Quarry, Lantern, Zapper; a little bit of Solar Wind jargon that basically translated as; "enemy in the light (or rather, at the end of the alleyway), launch shock missile". And a "shock missile" was... well, you'll find out in a moment.

Pike accessed the installed weapons system of its Peregrine fighter, and quickly selected the relevant missile from the twelve currently available in the pods. A fraction of a second and a calculated clear flight path for the unorthodox ordinance, and the missile was launched. It streaked forward, missing every cable and other alleyway protuberance, flashed underneath Prism 5's right hand drive unit, and shortly exited the alley. Only then, did it activate.

...The term "missile" has become something of a joke lately. Miss. It isn't usually something you want your weapons to do... if you happen to be following conventional military thinking. But the Solar Wind reconnaissance forces were quite frequently passed down weapons from their superiors, for which thinking unconventionally was a matter of fact requirement. Energy blades for fighters; great if you happened to be a good pilot that could out-maneuver an opponent at close range, not so good when you happened to be a relative rookie. Or when the enemy had weaponry that could blow you away long before you got into range to use them. MAG-missiles that relied on missing, a built in electromagnet yanking metallic enemies right from their cover, detonating only when it had a fair few attached to it. And the Shock missile, which was essentially a good way to area deny.

...For the horde of Sentinels arrayed around the alleyway exit, their simple minds only just had time to register the missile speeding through their midst, when it zapped each and every one of them with the huge levels of static electricity suddenly permeating its

fuselage. Thirty odd Sentinels recieved the shock of their artificial life. Thirty odd Sentinels found their CPUs overloaded and fried. Thirty odd Sentinels crashed lifelessly to the ground. The missile, charge depleted, continued harmlessly on its way.

Prism 5 emerged, made a sharp 90 degree turn to the left, and began reaching for the upper limits of its afterburner capability. Which was not such a smart idea, if Pike had any opinion. This was because they'd just emerged onto a railway, or whatever the Forerunners called their equivalent. Three monorail tracks side by side, hosts of cranes and the like to the right, and a building to the left.

â€|And the regular freight trains to dodge. So far, nothing really to worry about, but what if the speeding Peregrine's encountered three trains at once? Go above them? Yeah, about thatâ€|

Walls of glass or some Forerunner analogue rose up, encapsulated the lines in a transparent ribbed tube. The railway left the ground, rising up on slender pylons to arc across a series of empty drainage ditches. Now finding themselves careening down an insanely enclosed spaced with the added slalom of regular trains to navigate, the fighters naturally slowed down.

â€|But not too much, because tail cam showed a sizeable number of glittering, sharp looking objects rapidly approaching from the rear. Pike dodged past an oncoming train occupying the central track, lugging metal piping or something to some unknown destination, passed the back end and found something now keeping pace with it on the other side.

"_**Brot!**_"

The object loosed a storm of light â€" needle thin Sentinel beams flashing on and off in rapid sequence. Pike heard an audible alarm blare in its cockpit â€" port side shields were down to twenty percent. There wasn't much armour waiting in reserve â€" another salvo, and Solar Wind would be down a Pike. It responded with the only weapon it had that could twist to face the mystery assailant â€" the small machine gun mounted above the cockpit, now back online.

â€|Which did surprisingly well. The low caliber rounds pinged off silver armour, doing little damage until they found the thrusters up back. A slight detonation, and the machine found itself crashing and burningâ€| but the gap was immediately filled by another one. This one didn't open fire immediately, apparently trying to gauge the Peregrine fighter's abilitiesâ€| but keeping out of Pike's firing angle. So Pike returned the favour and had an ogle itself.

Long and sharp, that was the best way to describe it. Like the Blade, clearly an evolution of the Sentinel line, but this one was designed to excel at speed. Streamlined, pointy nose, rounded thruster housing at the rear. Weapons: ball mounted micro Sentinel beams that â€" judging by the last volley â€" emphasized rate of fire and accuracy over brute strength. Still a dangerous combination though.

The machine disappeared, victim to prism 5 dropping back and spearing it with laser blade.

"_Prism 4,_" the other pilot's voice bounced across the airwaves, "_Prism 2 just sent a message. They say they've intercepted an order regarding the deployment of 'Scimitars'. I'd say the message came a little late, wouldn't you?_"

"_Understatement of the millennia!_" Pike returned, rolling to the right to dodge a barrage of beams from the remaining "Scimitars" behind. In a flash, they caught up; the two Peregrines suddenly in the midst of a cloud of machines all trying their best to scuttle the intruders. Shards of light tore in, pummeling shields dangerously low, the machines nimbly dodging from the return fire with no apparent effort. Bullets just ricocheted or missed entirely, Prism 5's blade attacks occasionally connected " but without the element of surprise tended to gouge the side of tube instead. In fact, the _Scimitars_ were hitting each other more than the Peregrines were. But then, a respite. Another train ploughed past, scattering combatants all over. Pike took action.

"_Prism 5; Proximity, Power Cut!_"

With that, it launched another missile" and the Scimitars immediately ceased fire. In fact, they ceased all activity outright and crashed. The missile, which hadn't exploded or anything, suddenly seemed rather superfluous. Except" it wasn't, or rather, hadn't been. A fraction of a second after launch, it had sent out an omni-directional electromagnetic pulse, and the Scimitars had just had another weakness exposed. Pity another batch was closing from the front, and Pike only had another two of those missiles left.

"_That's it, I'm leaving this party_" Prism 5 sounded a little woozy " even though Solar Wind circuitry was hardened to EMP attacks, having one go off in the immediate vicinity or _right in your __**face**_, was going to have some effect whatever you did. Pike, being essentially at ground zero, took a few moments to analyse the situation properly, and notice Prism 5 had torn a hole in the tube roof and exited. Tail swinging around as it struggled to control its thrusters adequately, it made for the hole and" _just_" made it through. The meandering tail received a few more dents, and the tube found itself with a bigger hole than ever, but all in all, an adequate result. They were out.

"_Prism 5, what's our situation?_"

Both fighters gained altitude, soaring up to a level just below the level of the top floor. Prism 5 promptly went even higher, popping its cockpit above the roofs and doing a quick on-the-go 360 spin to visually survey the surroundings, leaving Pike to try and get its rebelling circuitry back under control. Perhaps switching certain functions to reser- no, that made no difference.

"_I'm surprised_,_" Prism 5 announced, dropping back to Pike's level and matching heading, "_Nothing but a few Sentinels way to seven o'clock. Maybe_"

Both fighters rolled to the right, dodging a sudden beam barrage from behind, and swerved round the corner of the next building.

"_Huh, so much for tempting fate_,_" the other pilot continued,

watching the Scimitars round the corner behind and continue catching up, "_didn't even wait for me to finish the sentence!_"

And suddenly it became a beam war, Prism 5 flipping nose over tail so it was now travelling backwards, rolled upright and began using its own lasers to tear into any Scimitar that got within range. They soon learnt their lesson, the remaining six Scimitars holding back and trying their luck with a little bombardment.

"_Could use some help here!_"

Pike _would_ have acknowledged, but it was still struggling to do more than keep its fighter flying. The EMP was starting to wear off, but combat functions were still asking too much.

"_Fine, I'll do it myself_" Prism 5 ceased evasive manoeuvres and cut power to its main drive units, the bright blue within momentarily dimming as the fighter suddenly dropped back. The Scimitars, simple minds unable to quickly comprehend what their opponent was up to, failed to react. Beams struck the Peregrine's shields, but not enough, and then it was amongst them, slicing left and right.

...One by one, the Scimitars succumbed. Prism 5 retook its place by Pike's side.

"_Recovered yet?_"

By now, Pike had... mostly.

"_Everything but weapons. They'll be another minute_"

...

"..._Well better hope nothing gets in-_"

They quickly dived under a Super Enforcer, the latter's mortars raining down around them as they beat a hasty retreat. Additional Scimitars popped into view behind.

"..._I __**really**__ need to control my vocabulator_"

They sped onwards, encountering a Blade but little else - and that somehow fell to Prism 5's lasers suprisingly easily. But in the moment of its destruction, things went from bad to worse.

Because it was at that very moment, that Pike noticed a curious anomaly on sensors. It signalled Prism 5, and the two fighters revectorred for a mid-chase flyby.

Such a move proved a deadly mistake...

"_Mornin'_" a voice said conversationally, even as machine gun fire shredded through Pike's fuselage. Moments later Prism 5 split in two, victim of a dead on plasma railgun shell.

"_Espada?!_"

It _was_, the two C. IV's standing in front of a shimmering portal embedded into a tall, jagged tower. Machine guns blazing, they

continued their inexplicable assault on Pike, thankfully missing beyond a few sporadic impacts. The last surviving Peregrine shot out of sight... straight into the guns of the Rhyno Servicer hiding round the corner.

"_Did we mention we're going freelance?_" one of the Servicer's pilots commented, even as the continued gunfire shattered tail fins and dropped Pike into an uncontrolled dive.

"_I wouldn't have guessed-_" Pike screamed back, managing just barely to return to a horizontal flight path through haphazard use of maneuvering thrusters, skimming along just barely above the ground. Any thoughts of clawing back for the sky vanished with the realisation that the main drive units were now spluttering, bearing clusters of bullet holes testament to the Servicer's accuracy. And Pike's own weapons were still offline...

"_Oh, frak it!_"

"_Sure!_"

I said that on an open channel? The Peregrine's nose drooped, scraping the ground, while tailcam showed the first C. IV stomped round the corner behind - plasma railgun exposed and aiming for the fleeing fighter. The only bright spot; something else to emerge from the corner - in pieces and trailing fire - was a Scimitar. Espada was engaging the Forerunner machines as well. But this was little comfort to Pike, hearing the lock on alarm go off.

In front - a hole in the ground. A vertical shaft of unknown depth, of unknown purpose. Just large enough to hold a fugitive Peregrine. Flying in there was roughly equal to committing suicide, was an insane proposition... but it was Pike's last hope for survival. Squeezing one last burst of thrust from failing drive units, Pike jolted the Peregrine upwards onto a parabolic arc that would drop it straight into the shaft.

...The C. IV fired. A plasma railgun shell tore for the fighter.

...Something crashed onto the rim of the shaft, seesawed for a brief second... and toppled in. A moment later, a detonation and a plume of smoke.

"_Target eliminated_"

###

(A/N: I know what you're probably thinking, that this is getting a) too bizarre, and b) not enough Halo loyal. Well, the out of universe stuff is now over with for a good while, and as for point [b]... take a look at the next chapter's title! Like I said, it should be uploaded tomorrow.)

****Unit Profile: Peregrine Fighter****

****Overview****: A small fighter deployed by Solar Wind. It emphasises speed and maneuverability over durability. Weaponry is variable, and generally specialised for a specific role.

The fighter has a long, narrow fuselage with a dipped nose. The cockpit is located here, a bubble canopy providing an exceptional forward viewing arc. From a position approximately a quarter of the way back along the fuselage, the main drive units are stalk mounted horizontally. This, combined with efficient omni-directional couplings that allow each drive unit to swivel and twist in any direction independently of one another, allows the fighter exceptional maneuverability. The rear of the fuselage is dominated by two stubby tails, and a pair of concealed afterburners.

A single spider pilot is used for each fighter's crew.

****Dimensions****: Length: Approximately six metres. Width: One and a half metres (fuselage only) or three metres (fuselage and main drive units).

****Armament and Defences****: A Peregrine fighter will always carry a light machine gun mounted above the cockpit. The remaining two weapons are mounted below and just forward of the main drive units. These are variable. At present, the two weapons seen in these slots are missile pods and short range, free rotational energy blades.

The Peregrine fighter's main defence comes in the form of an energy shield. However, there is very little armour to complement this, so any shot capable of penetrating the shield will often cripple the fighter. In addition, the shield does not perfectly wrap around the fuselage and results in additional air resistance. As such, the shield will often be deactivated while within an atmosphere, with the pilot using the craft's superior agility to avoid damage instead.

-Next Phase: Spartan Ops...

14. Phase 14: Spartan Ops

****Halo Genetics****

(A/N: As promised, another chapter. I did want to upload it yesterday (when it would have greater impact in a meta sort of way), but that would have meant no proofreading - which is even worse than my usual level of checking. Coincidentally, the inclusion of a certain section below is not just because Halo 4 was launched yesterday - it does have relevance to the plot. And yes, this is another quite long chapter; better get the coffee ready!

...And now it's posted, I can finally go to bed...)

Disclaimer: Archon, Balance, Installation R-06 (Chimaera), Solar Wind, all aspects of Mercurial Wisdom, all named marines, Patab, Dire Thorns, "Avians", Blades and Scimitars - mine. Everything else - 343 Industries. ...Yeesh, even the bare basics seem stupidly convoluted nowadays...

****Phase 14: Spartan Ops****

Archon, Sector 16 â€" Alpha Base (Archon Occupation Day 6, Late Morning)

"...I'd say we have a problem. Great."

Someone grumbled, a barely audible "Well we knew _that_." But Serina's comment still managed to drop the command tent's "optimism level" yet another notch lower. Captain James Gregory Cutter, just finished with his explanation of the upcoming mission, looked up.

"Settle down people. There's a reason I'm assigning the Master Chief and our own Red Team to this mission. Follow Green team's orders, stay alert, and you'll be that much more likely to survive."

The grumbling died down a little, even if no one actually attempted to point out that Cutter had said survive, not _succeed_.

"Aye Sir, you have a point," Serina responded, "but let me just recap.

"We receive word from Solar Wind - an organisation we have no knowledge of or reason to trust - that UNSC reinforcements are planetbound. We suspect this much is true because they've already contacted us themselves. But Solar Wind _also_ say that Tempest plans on ambushing the rescue force with Blades. This, we have only its word for. SPARTAN 042 and three of our marines are aware that a Blade is bad news, so the threat is realistic.

"_But_, two things bug me. Firstly, why do both Solar Wind and the supposed reinforcements say that the latter plan on making planetfall up by the lake? Why not here? They could easily set down on that honking great plain of grass out there."

Cutter sighed.

"Apparently, it was the closest point they could lay a descent course in for." He gave a meaningful glance skywards. "Super Sentinels and their larger brethren were inconveniently blocking the nearer routes."

...

"Forgive me for stating the obvious, but that would be a Sentinel sheepdog herding its sheep, right into the pen for slaughter. Why didn't they abort?"

"Are you kidding?" Smith spoke up, earning a few disapproving glares in the process, "Sentinels? We can handle _Sentinels_. They just don't know to worry about the _other_ metal monsters."

"...Marines, _nearly_ as suicidally gung ho as a SPARTAN."

"Hence my authorising this rescue mission." Cutter resumed his role in the discussion, giving warning looks at Smith and Serina (using the Chief as a proxy in her case). "We can't give much, but those of you assembled here are to take what vehicles you can and assist. Bring everyone you can find back, _alive_."

More muttering, but it was soon replaced by acceptance. _Friends in need_; the newest arrivals to Wisdom's party were risking themselves to rescue the long lost UNSC complement from the _Spirit_, and now they would do the same. Except...

"Alive?" one of the marines was heard to mutter. "Funny sort of thing to say..."

"I said _alive_," Cutter raised his voice, "because the UNSC reinforcements are apparently accompanied by _friendly_ Elites. You may find it hard to believe, but we do have a precedent. You've all had a chance to see the friendly Grunt the Master Chief brought in with him, just remember that before you open fire on supposed allies."

He turned his attention back to the map laid out on the ground at the centre of the tent.

"Enemy composition is expected to be Sentinels, Blades and Enforcers. However, we know better than to assume the unexpected won't make an appearance" and we know that there are Flood stored in close proximity to the landing site."

"The air grew noticeably chillier with _that_ reminder. But the mood swung back a little as many hands tightened on rifles and shotguns. It was typical human behaviour; even an eldritch abomination could be dealt with if you had enough firepower" says the bravado to the logic centre that prefers its little bit of pessimism, and can quite clearly be ignored. It's overreacting, as _usual_.

"Stay on your guard. Dismissed."

And with that, the assembled marines filed out" but not the SPARTANs. They stayed where they were, faceplates turned towards something behind him. Slowly, the captain became aware of a presence there, about turned to find a Sentinel gazing at him.

"Sir," the Master Chief asked, "What about them?"

The captain looked the SPARTAN in the faceplate for several long, drawn out seconds. Finally, he released his breath.

"I know they mean a lot to you" but we can't afford to weaken the camp further. The C. Sentinels stay"

Cutter sensed the SPARTAN's thoughts turn grim, but stiffen to resolve soon after. The commanding officer had spoken, and his words were law. He may not like being separated from the only known pieces of his most loyal companion, but apparently one Sentinel was one too many. And his irrational request being turned down wasn't entirely bad " here Cortana would be safe.

"Yet, understandably, the SPARTAN still wasn't happy at going alone did his head just perk up?

"It had. And that could only mean one thing " Serina had whispered something to lighten his mood. What, he had no idea" but it probably wasn't going to be the most welcome bending of the rules.

Scowling, he turned away from the Sentinel" only to go crashing to the floor. He'd tripped over something, but what? _That_ phantom "ship's cat" I keep hearing rumours about?

Noâ€¦ it couldn't have been. For certain facts conspired to push the theory back. Firstly, for reasons of animal cruelty prevention, Cutter had given an impression in the strongest possible way, that he would greatly disapprove of anyone bringing such an independently minded animal aboard. A ship was not a suitable environment for a hunting animal, not unless you liked seeing your crew constantly pounced upon by something that really needs more opportunities to practice its stalking techniques. Hence, no (known) cats. And secondly, Patab was a mere few feet away, and looking all too innocent. Suspiciously innocent. The sort of innocence where the suspect has his or her face raised, eyes blank and looking elsewhere, while the mouth takes the opportunity to do a little tuneless whistling.

â€¦And in that moment, Cutter made his own irrational decision. But then, the Grunt really needed to earn his keep anywayâ€¦

###

Archon, Sector 16 - Exact Location Unknown (Archon Occupation Day 6, Late Morning)

...After a long, long struggle, Tempest had finally yielded to Solis and Nocturne. Now, it was Solis who floated in Archon's local uplink centre, browsing every transmission (Forerunner or not) that it could lock itself onto. Something, and it wasn't quite sure what, had been bothering it of late...

"...A curious trail, our friends doth leave, making their mark on history's weave..." Nocturne murmured, still only partially "awake" in the back of the Monitor's circuitry.

"Quite..." Solis absently responded, trying its hardest not to get distracted. Fed up with listening in to the arriving UNSC Pelicans, abuzz with confidence that they could handle anything the Forerunners threw up (fools), it quietly pulled up real time footage of the vast underground storage vaults, home to all those discarded experiments or bits of salvaged space debris. Maybe something in there would jolt its memory over just what felt wrong.

...Even a split personality Monitor was more complex than the majority of sentients would expect. It was true that only one of Mecurial Wisdom's personalities could be fully active at any one time, but it most certainly wasn't true that the others had to be asleep. If the one on top desired, it could enter into debate with a dormant personality, the latter being able to speak to the former but little else. If the dominant personality really wanted to risk a premature changing of the guard, it could even grant one or both of the others access to the exterior senses and channels.

...Such an act of kindness could easily go wrong, especially if Tempest was involved. But for now, Solis was allowing Nocturne limited operations, hoping the "crazy one" would come up with something useful... and not backstab it instead.

Image after image flashed past its perception, much faster than any organic being could possibly have comprehended. Storage vault B-05, where pieces of the Vesuvius were neatly stacked one on top of the

other, alone but for a covering of not so neat dust. Vault D-09, home to the barely used Promethean Knight assembly line (and "barely used" meant the thing had been turned on a grand total of once. The layer of dust in there was thicker than the one carpeting the Vesuvius fragments). Vault F-02, a rather grisly affair filled with... actually, Solis really didn't want to know just what those long, branching slimy things were. Neither it seemed did Tempest, because next door, in Vault F-03, was the rest of that thing from Chimaera. The horrific fusion of Solar Wind C. IV mech and biological organs... the abomination standing half disassembled (or was that dissected?), a toothy jaw drooping lifelessly from an otherwise metal head, skeletal and far oversized wings hanging limply from its back. Old stains, a mixture of blood and oil, plastering the floor.

...The project had even been too much for Tempest, who had started the investigation but soon given up in sheer horror at just what Installation R-06's Monitor had been up to. And so the abomination's remains were divided, such innards that had been extracted in Vault F-02, and the rest in F-03.

"_...Wrong it may be, to slander one's kind, _

But shared between Monitors, is one deranged mind."

"_...I wouldn't go **that** far..." Solis murmured, even if it didn't quite disagree. One that created monsters to fight monsters, one obsessed with rings above all else " to the point it would quite happily let the Flood swamp the galaxy, one constantly at war with itself... no, Monitors didn't seem to enjoy the proximity of sanity.

"_...Take a friend, _a comrade found..." Nocturne continued in a near silent voice, "_Killed twice, and still wandering around_."

...Solis paused in its inspection of the vaults. That sounded almost important...

"_What?_"

"_One who knows our ancient foe, a foe so twisted to change itself so,_"

Secrets lost to all but one, till forgotten mouths reveal how a war was won..."

"..._What are you looking at?_"

No answer was coming, so Solis turned its attention to the other data stream passing into its shell. Carefully, it analysed the signature, and... well, that was surprising. Nocturne it seemed, was studying a transmission... about two years out of date. So what could be in there that was so interesting? After all, if the computer log was correct, it had been detected " _just " _by one of Archon's deep space probes and relayed back. The resultant file had only been accessed once, by Tempest, who had promptly encrypted and submerged it into a technical report on AII (Avian Instinct Influencer) chips. Now, Solis never looked amongst files related to how Tempest had been fiddling with the wildlife " it was another case of "even

mechanicals get nightmares, never mind the little fact of not needing sleep!" So, Tempest had clearly been trying to hide something. But what could have warranted such an action?

...Only one way to find out. Access the message and have a listen.

...

There was no visual, but static assailed the Monitor's senses; harsh static quite alien to Forerunner technology. Amidst that static, buried deep and difficult even to detect, a voice. A human voice.

"_I thought so..._" Solis muttered, trying and not quite succeeding to separate words from static. Human, male, possibly what passed for middle aged in that species. Words permeated with tension, spoken low and close to the microphone. The speaker was scared, worried that he'd be caught...

...Ah, this bit was a little clearer...

"...is UNSC lieutenant Giles Marson, serial number 599-571-422. Our ship has been... commandeered, we need assistance!"

...Hold on, had Nocturne been listening to a simple _hijack_? From two years ago? Something like that was a little trivial-

"...I don't know how long I have. Life support and other systems have been on the blink lately, ever since we picked up that, that _cursed being_. The only systems still working are the engines... it's desperate to get somewhe-"

"_Now you __**really**__ shouldn't be doing that, should you?_"

Something dropped â€" probably the microphone. There was the sound of scrambling, and a familiar low humming â€" familiar, because it was the _same_ humming being emitted by Solis. In other words, the new arrival was another Monitor... even if the noise didn't seem all there... like it was being produced by speakers within the transmission or something.

"_Didn't we agree no communications? You should be grateful, you and your friends aboard this ship will soon be privileged to step foot on our greatest secret, the Ark._"

Solis almost physically recoiled, unable to bring itself to believe what it had just heard. The_ Ark_? But it had been destroyed... hadn't it?

"But... Chakas!"

"_Really, why do you insist on referring to me by that name? I am 343 Guilty Spark, Monitor of... __**former**__ Monitor of Installation 04! And this communication will cease __**now**__._"

And it did, leaving Solis to consider how a Monitor might become shell-shocked. Such a state of mind would be an _improvement_ over how it felt now. 343 Guilty Spark _operational_? And heading to the

Ark?

...Had it misread the date?

...

...No, that definitely said 255_4_. Which meant that 343 Guilty Spark had, to adapt an appropriate human saying, a number of lives rivalling a cat. And so it seemed, did the... the...

Hastily, it opened a superluminal frequency to the "Warden", a tiny automated space facility hidden in the dense clutter of the galactic core. The Warden had just one purpose " to act as a relay point for inter-Installation transmissions that couldn't be sent direct for reasons of security. No one wanted the Gravemind backtracking a transmission and finding an R-series Installation after all. Quickly, Solis made an enquiry; requesting the status of the Ark.

-ARK STATUS CONFIRMED.

-INSTALLATION 00: OFFLINE

...What? At last check, the Ark had been understandably listed as "destroyed". Seeing it upgraded to a mere "offline" was unexpected to say the-

-INSTALLATION 0: ACTIVE

...and Warden dumped more unwanted confusion.

"_Nocturne? Have you ever heard of an Installation 0?_"

Nocturne stirred from whatever it was doing now.

"_Installation 0, did you say? The Ark lost a nought along the way?_"

Apparently not. And somehow, Solis doubted Tempest was any the wiser " this wasn't the sort of thing it liked to keep secret. Antagonistic to the other two personalities Tempest might be, but it at least knew to leave them in the loop regarding Forerunner occurrences...

...Ah, that was it! With a rush, memories came storming into Solis' mind. It now realised what had been niggling at it earlier.

There were some... rather large gaps in the Archon database. Gaps relating to humans. For the most part, Solis hadn't had real need to investigate records from a time many millenia before it had... manifested. It had browsed its way through, true, but it hadn't studied in any real detail. There was a lot of data to check, so the only feasible way to cover a worthwhile portion of the vast archive (and still keep Archon running) had been to... skim read.

But, even in its haste, Solis had noticed considerable periods of time where major events had no actual record attached - just reports. The Forerunner - Human war was a key example. Most other decades had recordings, security footage, news reports logged, but for that war and a few choice other periods, nothing. Just second hand, sterile reports distributed from the Ark " the Installation "00" one -

listing "occurrences". Tempest was basing its little war on facts that it had never bothered to verify, that had no evidence attached.

...And to make Solis even more concerned, it had never been quite sure if the Monitor in charge of the Ark had an actual grip on sanity... or even if there was a Monitor assigned to the Ark. Certainly, none of the R-Series Monitors had had any contact with the elusive being... hold on. Nocturne had just red flagged another communicatÃ©, this one mere hours old. Solis' runaway train of thought was halted.

"_This is important, why don't you see; another piece to an ever deepening mystery..._"

Great, more to think about. Mentally resigning itself to the fact that Tempest taking control would be a blessing for once, Solis opened the proffered file.

-PRIORITY ALERT: ANY UNITS IN REINFORCEMENT RANGE OF INSTALLATION REQUIEM, ASSISTANCE REQUIRED.

"_Requiem?_"

The feed changed format and began displaying a scene... a forest. Dark, tropical, filled with... oh.

...There was a reason Archon still operated with Sentinels and other more conventional defence units. They had, fairly recently in cosmic terms, received instructions via the Warden on how to construct drone (and Solis had no idea why that word was emphasised) "Promethean Knights" and "Watchers", along with other assorted mechanical sentries. Tempest, loyal little Monitor that it was, had quickly set up a construction line for the former, turned it on... and moments later exterminated the product. In classic irrational "Tempest" behaviour, it had declared the being an "affront to nature". When Solis had next woken up, it had found a message waiting saying, in no uncertain terms, that Tempest would quite readily burn both reserve personality cores to ash if either of them turned the machine back on. Naturally, Solis had wandered over for a look... and for once, decided Tempest was justified.

Installation R-06, Chimaera, home to deranged experiments that would have most mad scientists shivering. Even destroyed as it probably was, it seemed Chimaera's ghost was still haunting the galaxy, because certain technology in the "Knight" had borne a considerable resemblance to technology in Chimaera's abomination. Not a one hundred percent match or anything, but 27067point84157 Variable Speculation had apparently gone and shared some ideas with Requiem. For that reason alone Solis was quite happy to stick to Sentinels, Enforcers and other derivatives, Requiem could keep its Prometheans to itself.

Arrayed in the image at the moment: a primeval forest, trees of colossal size. Positioned on the branches, perched on knotholes, clinging to creepers: Promethean sentries of varying design. All with eyes fixed on the ground below... on the figure standing there and holding a pilfered Promethean rifle. A figure that...

"_...It... It __**can't**__ be!_"

"_Check the date, the message is new,_"

"_We have a SPARTAN, Requiem has too._"

If Nocturne's words could be taken at face value, then this wouldn't have been unusual. Something to be worried about if you happened to be concerned for Requiem (which Solis was not - too many stories about the place), but not unusual. SPARTANs were bound to find their way there sooner or later.

Yet... this wasn't a SPARTAN, it was the SPARTAN. The same one currently giving Tempest so much grief. The armour was different in various subtle ways, but it still bore much of the same damage... the same gash on the chestpiece being a good example.

...In the image, the Master Chief looked around, raising his weapon. In doing so, he failed to respond in time to the Knight suddenly up close and personal. The Knight swiped, the SPARTAN's arm rising ever so slightly late in an attempt to deflect the blow-

The image went blank, replaced momentarily by lines of text... to the sound of gunfire, explosions.

-SPARTAN 117 IS PRESENT ON REQUIEM. EXTENSIVE THREAT POSED TO REQUIEM OPERATIONS - ALL UNITS ABLE TO GIVE AID ARE ORDERED TO DO SO IMMEDIATELY.

The message ended, leaving Solis to wonder just one thing.

"_Am I mistaken, or has the universe decided to go Precursor insane?_"

Nocturne deigned not to answer...

###

"_Archon â€" Sector 16, South of Pryda Lake (Archon Occupation Day 6, Early Afternoon)_"

"_rhaaaAAEEEEEEe..._"

The now familiar cry of Archon's most dangerous avian - still unnamed - drifted across the convoy of Warthogs, causing many a marine to flinch. And for good reason, everyone knew how they liked to eat.

"Another scalp diver up there, shall I show him the way to the afterlife?"

"...If it attacks, tree hugger." a somewhat distracted response came back. Acting lieutenant Falgarn was still acting funny over the news that they'd be saving Elites of all things. His delayed reaction to the news of another one of those brain hungry avians was just the latest apathetic response in a long line of them. And yet, he still had enough of his usual obnoxious self to call George du Plueiss a "tree hugger".

The convoy of two gauss Warthogs, five LAAG Hogs and one "SPARTAN" Hog - all but the last carrying four marines, were nearly at the

shores of the lake. In the sky above, the four Hornets of Ice Spear team circled, watching for any sign of trouble. They'd already taken a few potshots at a dozing leviathan lazing near the water's surface, but had failed to do more than irritate it before the tentacled monstrosity had dived. Thorn activity was alarmingly high as well, the Warthogs of Royal team had got a few nasty shocks in the woods when it had turned out the predators could _climb trees_. The convoy had slowed down a bit after that discovery, lest haste allowed another one to drop from a branch onto someone's head. It was just good luck that the first had tried its luck with a Hog carrying trigger happy shotgun marines.

Now the forest portion of the trail was behind them, and Royal team had finally been able to pick up speed. They'd exchanged Thorns for avians to be sure, but at least you could see the birds coming...

...the avian in question suddenly found its wings clipped by fire from the nearest Hornet. It fell towards the ground, screaming and trying to flap its shredded wings the entire way down. Only when it impacted with a sickening CRUNCH, did the screaming stop. Moments later, a Hog drove its heavy tyres straight over it.

"Anyone fancy bird for dinner?" a marine quipped over the comm. "I'm sure I can get rid of that venom enough to make it safe...ish to eat! And the squashed flavour-"

"Algart!" lieutenant Falgarn screeched back, "You are _not_ poisoning the camp again!"

In the back of the SPARTAN Hog, Douglas could _just _be seen grimacing through his currently non-reflective visor... by Alice anyway.

"Someone's got the right idea." he remarked at the faint sound of someone retching.

"You think?" she responded. "That was _not_ what we intended that second Thorn to be used for."

The Chief snorted. He was just glad he'd missed that little affair... even if being shot at by C. IV's was nearly as painful.

"Look on the bright side," Jerome pointed out, "at least we didn't hear that old "tastes like chicken" line..."

The convoy reached the lakeshore ring road and turned eastwards. No one felt the need to make their approach a secret; how _do_ you hide an eight strong Warthog convoy with accompanying air support?

"Ice Spear," Serina suddenly transmitted, "any communicatÃ©s from our friends?"

"_Negative_ ma'am, nothing yet. We're sending a recognition signal, shouldn't be long before they pick it up_."

Ice Spear team was, in addition to being the air support, also acting as communications relay. There was no time for a Hog to stop and launch a Myna aerial relay drone, and why bother when there were already friendly craft in the sky? It was one of two things that the

marines of Royal team were exceedingly thankful for. The _other_, was the SPARTAN Hog rolling alongside them, and how it had been modified.

In the space of a half hour that was _torture_ to the watching vehicle techs, the SPARTANS had changed their assigned Hog's equipment significantly. They'd torn out the M41 LAAG to increase room in the back, but replaced it with a pair of side mounted M247 general purpose machine guns. Seeing as Sentinels had a habit of swarming, yet each one going down easily to machine gun fire, two independently aimed weapons were deemed a fair trade off for lower calibre rounds. And if something heavier _did_ happen to show up, well, there were plenty of anti-armour weapons under that tarpaulin... including the deadliest sniper rifle known to man, the M99 Stanchion gauss rifle. Jerome would be wielding that one if push came to shove, Douglas had his rocket launcher, Alice a shiny heavy machine gun normally used as a turret, and the Chief was as usual outfitted with an MA5 and SPARTAN laser... the latter loaned by Jerome. He'd lost Johnson's old one to Tempest after all...

...And yes, there were other weapons under there. The SPARTANS were taking no chances; Douglas had learnt firsthand how troublesome a Blade could be... and Solis had mentioned a more advanced model entering service. If Archon had a newspaper, that would be one of the _least_ desired headlines.

...So would the next thing to happen.

"_Ice Spear 1 to Royal team, uh, we've got some good news and some bad news..._"

"Royal 1 here, requesting clarification."

"_We've picked up transmissions from the fore. UNSC __**and**__ Elite, and they appear to be co-ordinating their efforts against Sentinels. In other words, they __**are**__ friendly__**. **__As for the bad news..._"

The Hornet co-pilot speaking paused, possibly aware that he was about to deliver some very unwelcome news to a convoy of LAAG armed marines. But they wouldn't shoot the _messenger_... would they?

"Spit it out soldier." Serina's irritated voice went back.

"_Uh...yes ma'am. New orders from base: Captain Cutter has requested that Green team split off._"

"WHAT?" Silence met Serina's outburst, before she spat out another word in a calmer but more _dangerous_ tone. "Explain."

"..._I'll read the message._"

"_Report from Solar Wind indicates a possible way to rescue the allied forces crashed on the moon. During an investigation by their forces on the moon, they were ambushed by Blades and their own renegade ground teams. Subsequent scans from orbit have indicated the presence of a wormhole connecting the moon to Archon, bypassing the orbital defences. The Archon side of this portal emerges in a

structure on the northern side of the lake._

"_Solar Wind are concerned that Tempest will soon move against the survivors of the Conviction; these include friendly Elites and fellow UNSC marines. It is unable to offer assistance itself but believes a small strike team will be able to infiltrate the moon and reach the Conviction. As Balance only holds a rarefied atmosphere, only SPARTANs with their vacuum resistant armour will be able to survive long enough to reach the objective._

"_The captain hereby orders Green team to make for the wormhole. The remainder of Royal and Ice Spear teams are to proceed as originally planned._"

"We aren't actually doing this, are we?" Alice asked. But she already knew the answer.

"It's a direct order." The Chief responded, slowing down and turning the Hog back the way they'd come. "If it was a suicide mission then we'd be justified in turning it down but-

"Hello, this is a suicide mission!" Serina butted in. "Four SPARTANs against a whole moon is pushing it, even with your luck."

"Meh, we needed a challenge anyway."

...

"Sometimes Alice," the AI eventually responded, "I think you SPARTANs would jump into Hell and take on every demon in there if you were ordered to."

Douglas and Alice watched as the rest of the Hog convoy, and every glum looking marine on board, vanished behind them. Suddenly, they felt very much alone... until a pair of Thorns jumped from the nearby woods. Then "alone" would have been preferable. Two long bursts of machine gun fire later (Dire Thorns still being as bullet resistant as ever), and they were alone again properly.

"At least we know the weapons work." Jerome said, trying to look on the bright side.

"Good. I'm sure the first few waves of Sentinels and Blades will be very pleased to hear that."

"Lighten up Serina. You are under the protection of the UNSC's best troops."

When Serina responded to that one, her voice was just dripping with venom. "And I'm currently reliant on the biggest risk taker this side of the Andromeda galaxy for survival. Not comforting. And I'm sure we've forgotten som-

"Are we there yet? Me bored!"

The SPARTANs exchanged glances. They couldn't have just heard what they thought they had... could they?

Alice gripped the side of the Hog for support, before using her other

hand to lift the edge of the tarpaulin. Guess who was underneath, crouched amongst the various weapons of war...

"First strike for Murphy's Law." she said, staring at their friendly neighbourhood Unggoy. "We forgot to let our passenger switch Hogs, so now we're juggling shooting things and babysitting."

"...Say again?" Jerome called from up front. "Why babysitting?"

"...Are you going to shove him off and let him walk home, alone with all the Thorns?"

"...Uh... Hold on, since when are we the sentimental ones?"

Good question, but no one had an answer for it. So the Chief ended the discussion.

"It's too late to turn around. Tagalong 1 is staying with us. Let's find that portal."

And he put his foot down, sending the Hog screaming along the road. Time was now of the essenc-

"...Wait... Tagalong 1?"

###

Archon, Sector 16 " Southern Shore of Pryda Lake (Archon Occupation Day 6, Late Afternoon)_

#####_Overwhelming Force_#####

Meanwhile, the remainder of Royal team and their aerial escort had reached the edge of the engagement zone, the extensive stretches of open ground surrounding the imposing dome of the Flood Containment Facility. The sound and sights of battle filled the air, a continual deafening assault on the senses that showed no sign of dying down any time soon. Acting lieutenant Falgarn and his squad, mounted on Royal 4, gunned the engine, while private du Pluiess readied the LAAG for firing.

"_Ice Spear 1 to ground forces, reinforcement LZ in site. Combat between allied forces and Sentinels confirmed, moving to assist._"

"Ice Spear 1, Royal 1 copies. ETA is two. Enemy force composition?"

"_Large quantity of Sentinels, four Blades and a few Enforcers. Possible Thorn activity as well. Tempest isn't playing around, watch yourself._"

"Likewise. Royal 1 out."

The Hornets roared away, sighting a Blade and homing in on it. Behind, the Warthogs of Royal team accelerated and broke from the road.

"UNSC "Illegal Immigrants", this is UNSC Royal team from Spirit of

Fire_Alpha Base, we are inbound on your position. Requesting sitrep."

"_This is Illegal Immigrants, aka Double I. We've got Sentinels all over â€" we can handle them. What we __**can't**__ handle are those big things that refuse to go down to our weaponry! And, who said anything about being assaulted by giant man eating wolves?_"

"Welcome to Archon, my friend; you'll get used to it. Royal 1, engaging momentarily."

Ahead, the extent of the situation was growing ever more frightful. Swarming Sentinels filled the skies, circling the distant grounded Pelicans, now lying abandoned. Flashes of muzzle fire and occasional missile plumes to the left showed where the beleaguered marines were making their stand, assaulted from all sides and only managing to hold their own because the Blades and Enforcers were more interested in the few rumbling Scorpions and darting Hogs â€" all trying valiantly to keep the enemy's attention on _them_, and the battle away from their un-armoured brethren. But the Poor Bloody Infantry still had Sentinels and the regular hungry Thorn rush slamming into their barricades to deal with.

"Royal Team, let's go!"

The front three Warthogs of Royal Team screeched a hard left, LAAGs opening up and pouring fire into the Sentinels. Following, the remaining pair of LAAG equipped hogs screeched right, adding their firepower to that of the Gauss Hogs behind in taking down an Enforcer.

"_Whoa! Ice Spear 2 to all units, do not, repeat, do __**not**__ fire bullets at the Blades; the blasted thing just sends them straight back at you!_"

"_WHAT!_"

The warning came too late. Behind Falgarn's Hog, the marine manning the gauss cannon on Royal 6 loosed a shot at the nearest Blade. The magnetically accelerated round tore through the air faster than the eye could follow, slamming into the shimmering silver shield surrounding the Blade... and stopped dead. For an instant, the smouldering round was stationary... but then it accelerated again _in the opposite direction_. The only thing that saved Royal 6's marine occupants from an instant death was the fact the Hog had moved since firing... but the round still tore through the rear wheel and brought it to a juddering halt. Sensing a weakened foe, every Sentinel in the vicinity changed course to home in on the stricken vehicle, sheer volume of beams overcoming the gauss cannon's feeble attempts to halt their progress. It soon fell silent.

"Royal 6 is gone," Falgarn shouted into the comm. "Blades can deflect Gauss rounds, recommend dealing with the small fry first!"

LAAG blazing, Royal 4 dove for the next Enforcer â€" currently distracted by a circling Hornet - and pounded from behind. It dropped like a stone, but any celebrations were rudely cut short when another Blade was revealed waiting behind.

"Take this!" private Johanne Melchos screeched, launching a rocket from her M19. And then screeched again, when the Blade sent that back as well... or tried to anyway. The still thrusting rocket certainly began the journey back to sender, but didn't quite get that far before the plume forced it off course and harmlessly into the ground.

"Rockets too?"

"Double I to newcomers, ignore the big fish. Let our allies take care of them!"

"What allies?" someone shouted back, conveniently missing a trio of shadows suddenly sweeping across the battlefield. Three green Space Banshees on full boost, pylon mounted propulsion units shining bright as the alien attack craft screamed straight for a Blade. The Blade twisted, launched plasma orb and fired Sentinel beam. One Banshee caught the full force of the plasma orb, blinding the pilot long enough for a beam to swipe in and bisect the cockpit. The remaining two, hungry for vengeance, twisted gracefully out of the way and homed in on their prey. Twin class 2 energy cannons spat, superheated plasma intersecting and passing straight through the Blade's shields... and burning through the machine itself.

"Another gift for the Forerunners," a guttural, alien voice cut across the comm. channel. "And I shall gladly give them more. Hold out, comrades, and we shall return to slay another." The Banshees flashed away, drawing fire from Sentinels as they passed but taking nothing more than glancing hits.

"Was... that..?" du Pluiness managed to gasp out between bursts of his LAAG.

"Seems so." Joanne responded even as she took down another Enforcer with well placed rocket. Never thought I'd see Elites on our side."

"Double I to Royal and Ice Spear teams; quit gawking! Our friends can only do hit and run tactics, but that does **no** good if you boys and girls all die while they set up their next attack run!"

"Ice Spear 2 reporting Ice Spear 1's destruction. Ice Spear 2 will take over the relevant command duties."

"Oh Hell!" Dean yelled. "Blade right behind us, chasing us down!"

Falgarn responded by... slamming on the brakes? Suicidal though the move seemed, and it certainly gave the marines on board a nasty shock as they struggled to stay upright, the gambit paid off â€" the Blade didn't slow down in time and passed straight overhead. No one took a potshot at it this time.

"Where are those frikking Elites?" the lieutenant shouted, watching the Blade begin to turn back in their direction, faster than he could get the Hog moving again. "Not like them to be tardy when there's killing to be done!"

Something flashed by in the skies above, a UNSC Hornet sweeping round

the machine's flank and launching missiles.

"What are you idiots doing?" Falgarn yelled, watching the missiles deflected and sent back at the Hornet. "You know that fucking doesn't work!"

"Can't let the Elites show us up, can we?" the response came back, as the Hornet clawed the missiles out of the sky with machine gun fire and promptly launched another pair. "We've got a plan."

"Oh that's all we need, a pilot with a plan!"

Another Warthog bounced by, a barely heard "get your butts moving!" drifting back, onboard gauss cannon obliterating an incoming Enforcer. Above, the circling Hornet dealt with its own returning missiles a second time... and launched yet another pair.

"This had better work, because we're nearly out of missiles."

...This time, the missiles hit the Blade's defence field... and blew up. The Blade reared away, distinctly charred, still in the fight but... the eyes were gone!

"Got it! Ice Spear 4 to all forces, set missiles to proximity detonate when firing at Blades. Won't destroy them, but we just blinded one!"

Someone cheered over the comm., and the marines began to fight with renewed vigor. Another Blade joined the fight even as the Banshees came back and downed one more - spirits refused to be dampened. The numbers were still against them, but now they knew the machines could be beaten...

###

Archon, Sector 16 "Northern Shore of Pryda Lake (Archon Occupation Day 6, Late Afternoon)"

It had been a very harrowing ride for the passengers of the SPARTAN Hog. Forty minutes after their parting with Royal team, and they'd torn around a third of the lake. They'd torn past the canyon where Scout Team Charlie had had its fateful encounter with the Sentinel killing ground barring the direct route to the Foundry up north. They'd screeched through the crash site of the long gone Vesuvius, and they'd rattled their way across the bridge spanning the front of that giant cavern hiding the "Bastion of Evolution." All at the breakneck speeds the Chief was becoming infamous for. Serina had long given up whimpering at the frequent near dunking in Leviathan infested lake water, and Patab had apparently run out of vomit. For Alice and Douglas, the only two SPARTANs in a position to watch the little Grunt scrabbling at his methane re-breather, two resultant emotions engaged in open war. Were they supposed to be amused or disgusted?

...

Unable to come to a satisfactory conclusion, they settled for stoic SPARTAN silence. And roughly at the time Patab's face returned to its usual grey colour, they arrived at their destination.

"...Are you sure this is the place, Serina?" Douglas asked, staring over the top of the Warthog cab at the towering building in front.

"Since when am I not sure? I thought there was something odd about this place last time I was here."

Together, they eyed the structure; a tall, jagged affair looming on its own little island just offshore. It was audibly humming with energy - not a loud hum, but that deep sort that permeates the air and ground, vibrating your very soul. The only connection between lakeside road and island, a single heavy duty bridge.

...It seemed deserted. And that in itself was enough to put everyone on edge.

The Hog began to roll forward, onto the bridge. The Chief kept the revs low, one hand straying from the wheel to finger the MA5 resting beside him. Now, if only everyone would keep their mouths closed-

"...Funny. I was expecting a guard."

"Serina!" Alice shouted accusingly, quickly spinning her machine gun turret to face upwards, at the plummeting Avian suddenly casting a shadow across her visor. The weapon rattled, shredding flesh and feathers and sending the screeching horror plunging into the lake instead.

...A cloud of the Avian's brethren launched themselves from the cliffs behind, flapping powerfully in the direction of the Hog. All of them were screeching. All of them.

"Uh... I think I just pissed them off. Floor it!"

The Chief obliged, the sound of screeching rubber and sudden G-forces matching the Hog leaping forward. In the back, anything that wasn't very heavy, a SPARTAN, or somehow secured, went clattering to the rear of the Hog. Naturally, this included Patab... but he managed to recover and aim his Needler behind.

"What?" Serina complained over the roaring engine, "You can handle a few birds!"

"A few?"

Both machine guns opened up, firing at the swarm. They might as well have not bothered for all the effect it had. As with the purple crystalline needles Patab was unleashing, there were just too many bodies to hit.

"More of them!" Jerome calmly stated, watching another flock detach itself from the structure in front, each individual Avian folding wings and beginning their dive from the upper stories. The Hog neared the bridge's terminus, a shimmering portal becoming apparent inset in the tower's base.

"If that isn't the wormhole, then we're toast!"

"Oh for... save your bitching for the afterlife, soldier!" Serina screeched back at Douglas, the latter now firing his turret at the Avians diving from the fore.

The Warthog jolted, bouncing from the bridge and continuing its mad dash for the portal, about a minute away at current speed. It roared by a pair of wreckage heaps - twin Blades lying battered and twisted on the ground. A few metres later, and it was a scrapheap of Sentinels. Some of them were still smouldering.

"Who took out the sentries?"

"Bad guys- Yeeek!"

Patab had a good reason to screech - the portal, which they were still racing towards, had just disgorged a squadron of... was that a new model? The Chief had no time to pick up more than a few details, before the machines flashed overhead and twisted south, completely ignoring the charging SPARTANs. Maybe they thought the birds were sufficient. They probably were.

But they'd missed their chance. With one last jolt, big wheels crushing Sentinel wreckage and leaving the ground, the Hog bounced into the portal.

...The portal flashed bright, and the humans were gone.

###

Archon, Sector 16 "Southern Shore of Pryda Lake (Archon Occupation Day 6, Late Afternoon)"

"_...By the spilt blood of the Prophets..._"

The last surviving Space Banshee rolled away from the disintegrating remains of its wingmate, narrowly dodging the second beam salvo. Twelve fast moving objects streaked into view, splitting off one by one to rain misery down on the surviving marines.

"Royal 7 disabled! We nee-"

"_Ice Spear 2 gone from radar, someone report!_"

"New bogeys all round, all troops still capable of AA fire; light em up. Turn the sky into a meat grinder!"

One by one, the few Warthogs still with LAAGs and the ammo to use them turned their weapons skyward, each aiming at one of the newcomers.

"Geez the blighter's fast!" du Pluiess grumbled, struggling to turn Royal 4's LAAG to fast enough to keep the bogey in sight "let alone hit it. "Johanne, got any rockets left? Come on, don't be stingy!"

"Quit asking, I already told you no!" the other yelled back. Not unless you can persuade Dean to chuck a few of his."

A quick glance was enough to sink that plan "the marine in

question was claspings his bloody leg, seared nearly to the bone by a lucky Sentinel shot from before... and the biofoam wasn't helping numb the pain. Glassy eyed and dead to the world, Dean Algart would be out of action for a long time... _if_ they managed to survive this battle.

...Johanne clearly knew the answer as well, because her next move was to stand up in the passenger seat to give a passing streak a Shotgun blast... and was perhaps the most surprised of the lot when it responded by blowing up.

"...What the..?"

"Huh, guess they aren't so tough." Falgarn was heard to mutter, as he swerved the Hog to the left. The slight skidding of the back wheels gave another benefit â€" the Thorn just in the process of jumping up and at them found itself being batted away by the rear body. It still got up, but by that point the Hog was moving again, and du Pluiess was giving it some well deserved LAAG treatment.

"_Solar Wind to UNSC ground forces currently engaged in comb-_"

"_Get off the line!_" one of the two remaining Hornet pilots screamed at the sudden intrusion into the UNSC tactical channels. Solar Wind ignored them.

"..._You are currently engaged with Forerunner Scimitars. Orbital analysis indicates their weakness..._"

"What kind of _ally_ interferes with our coordination?" Double I directed skywards, while Falgarn threw Royal 4 into a slalom, neatly swerving an obstacle course of Enforcer wreckage â€" and one live Thorn. The latter didn't fit that category for long.

"..._predictable flight paths. They also lack armour..._"

"Thanks for _nothing_; we already figured that out!"

Solar Wind failed to respond; it had vacated the line. Around, the marines were starting to recover from their shock at the sudden attack. Marines began aiming weapons in front of the blurs, shotguns swatting the pests from the sky. The Sangheili, flipping his Banshee head over heels, gave a roar to accompany his fuel rod cannon blowing the pursuing Scimitar apart.

"_Ice Spear 3, out of ammo. Gaining altitude and switching to AWACs role..._"

The other operational Hornet dived groundwards, Ice Spear 4 seeking to shake a Blade off its tail.

"_Dammit, three Scorpions and it goes after __**me**__?_"

Three hundred metres away, the Immigrant Scorpions spoke as one. A triad of Enforcers, each late to the party, found that they instead an appointment with the ground and _weren't_ going to miss it. The Forerunner machines were rapidly losing their numbers advantage, down to less than fifty Sentinels, two Enforcers, the Blade and about six

Scimitars still nipping about like hyperactive four year olds on a sugar fix.

"_Come on, someone get it off me!_"

"_I hear, and I come_."

The Banshee twisted, launched a spur of the moment salvo at the Sentinel Major conveniently in the way, then soared over the falling wreckage to make a beeline for the harried Hornet. The Blade proved it wasn't _all_ that stupid, because it clearly recognised the Banshee for the greater threat. As Ice Spear 4 made a thankful getaway, the Forerunner machine swivelled, fired, andâ€| missed when the Banshee twisted between the beams and launched its own attack.

â€|The Blade understandably gave up the ghost after that, and the Banshee swept off in search of fresh prey.

"â€|He's good." Falgarn muttered, watching the Banshee deal with another Sentinel in passing, then sweep off to harass a Scimitar. Meanwhile, du Pluiness dealt with another, aiding an Illegal Immigrant Hog in penning the machine in and shredding it.

"_He_?" Johanne shouted back. "Doesn't sound like a (BANG) he to me."

She punctuated the sentence with a shotgun blast in the face of _another_ hopeful Thorn. Really, by this point there were more Thorns than Sentinels zipping around, and they were appropriately dropping like flies.

"And you'd be in a position to know, would you? Speak to a lot of Elites do you?"

Whatever she shouted back was lost in the wind of the passing Hornet, back to fell another few Sentinels. Even with the dozen Scimitar reinforcement column, the battle was clearly turning in the UNSC's favourâ€|

On the other side of the ever shrinking combat zone, three Scimitars converged on a single rumbling Scorpion. The tank's turret swung round in a futile attempt to bring one of them into its sightsâ€| and found itself bombarded with scalpel beam after scalpel beam for its trouble. It didn't take long for the tank to become a smouldering pile of wreckage.

â€|Yet the Scimitars paid dearly for their victory. One of their beams sliced into the _wrong_ section of armour, and struck the internal ammo racks. Ruptured high explosives reacted accordingly, blowing the human vehicle sky high, and taking two of the marauding machines with it. The last, badly singed but still in the fight, hurtled awayâ€| straight into the line of fire from another Scorpion. You can guess how that ended.

By this point, there were just thirty Sentinels, two fragile speedster Scimitars, and a whole load of Thorns remaining. The ground was littered with metal dead or dying, interspersed with the occasional marine casualty. Double I took this as a sign to try a little all-or-nothing move.

"Ladies and gents, boys and girls; time to converge. Ice Spear 3 confirms limited Forerunner force remains, let's form a firing line."

"Royal 1 to all surviving Royals, follow suit. Time to end this."

"Just what good will lining up for the firing squad do?" Johanne asked, as Falgarn spun the Hog to the left (coincidentally forcing du Pluiess to lose his grip on the LAAG and momentarily cease fire), beginning the drive for the Illegal Immigrants infantry position. Three other Hogs followed suit, including the sole surviving Hog of the Immigrant vehicle squad. At least the Scorpion main battle tanks with their thick armour had come off better. Two of them left.

"Well, if the tree hugger back there does his job and takes the mechanical bastards out, quite a bit." He raised his voice. "Pluiess, disciplinary measures if you don't take out at least another twenty of them."

The LAAG roared back into life, all but drowning out du Pluiess's response: "Oh come on Sir, that's not fair! There's hardly twenty of the buggers left!"

...Somehow, Falgarn still managed to respond... but for the sake of common decency, his words shall go unrecorded.

The UNSC forces coalesced into a single cohesive firing line, daring the remaining enemies to come and get them. Lacking any real intelligence, the machines and the Thorns obliged.

Marines and lone Sangheili Banshee circling above opened up with every weapon they had. It was time to finish the fight.

###

Balance - Surface __ (Archon Occupation Day 6, Late Afternoon (Sector 16 Time))_

#####_Under the Radar_#####

Balance...

From Archon, the moon had seemed fairly normal. Somewhat more reflective than one would expect, and quite irregular as well... but still just a moon. When you actually got there however...

Balance was, if anything, more impressive the longer you stayed. A quick look was sufficient to gauge that it was possible to fight here without any real issues - all a good SPARTAN would need to know. But given longer to stare, and minds started wondering at the architecture. Not long after that, and the topic of "how the hell does this thing go into Slipspace?" popped up and refused to leave. Naturally, things could only go downhill from there...

...If one had been alert, they might have noticed a green helmeted head peering round the side of a building. A green helmeted head

attached to a green armoured body, attached to a heavy machine gun that the head didn't really want reason to us-

Someone was alert. The head ducked back, persuaded to return to cover by a quartet of burning blue beams sweeping unhurriedly in its direction.

"Yep, still there." Alice commented, backing off and bringing up her HMG. "And still lousy shots."

"Any way past?" the Chief asked.

"Nope. Not unless we remembered to pack a jetpack. Guess we're waiting for the others."

Things had been going so well too. The SPARTAN Hog had set its tyres on Balance ground, to be met by... nothing actually. No welcoming committee, nothing. Just a few distinctly noticeable bits of wreckage, two of which were Blades - and the rest Enforcers. The latter had all been lying facing away from the portal... with the killing damage having been applied from behind. Clearly, the human LRV wasn't the first visitor to Balance today. Nor was it the last - a fair few of the Avians had rather foolishly chosen to continue their pursuit of the Hog through the portal. It had been a fatal lapse of judgement on their part, the birds having died almost immediately on coming into contact with the moon's rarefied atmosphere.

...Not willing to hang around for Tempest to reinforce the portal, the SPARTANS had understandably chosen to move along. They could see the shattered hulk of their destination in the distance, the recently vanquished Sangheili cruiser. Even the other bit of wreckage in front of the portal tower hadn't slowed them down... much. They'd just begun to eye the thing, clearly two seperated halves of a fighter but a type unknown to them, when motion trackers had started pinging blue to signify unknown contacts moving in their direction. One hasty retreat later, and they just avoided being noticed by the newly arriving Enforcers.

The SPARTAN Hog had advanced rather cautiously after that, each SPARTAN paying careful attention to motion tracker and personal senses alike. It worked, allowing them to keep under the Forerunner radar and out of sight... for a while at least. But a vehicle - even a light one such as the LRV was - is a hard thing to hide for long. Eventually their luck ran out.

...The manner of their luck running out... was almost comical. The Chief had braked in a narrow alleyway while they waited for the latest patrol to go on its merry way. They'd waited with breath stagnant in the throat, all weapons pointing at the alleyway entrance. Any Sentinel trying to ingress that way wouldn't have enough time to blink, let alone regret its decision.

...Then the words "Nice Sentinel" had drifted up from behind them. As heads swung round and looked at their little hitchiker, disbelieving eyes locked on to see him turning back from the motion of giving it a pat.

...You could see penny drop inside his head as Patab realised what he'd just done. He slowly turned back, looked at the machine, looked

to the dumbfounded SPARTANs, and finally scrabbled for his Needler. By that point Douglas had given the thing a few Magnum rounds... cue the sudden influx of machines from every direction.

They'd got moving pretty quickly to dodge the worst of the storm descending upon them. Their first serious opponent, i.e. one that didn't just fall to a few well placed volleys from the machine guns, had been a Blade. They'd quickly learnt the problems of dealing with that, but they'd also learnt that the protection granted by its miracle shielding didn't extend to Patab's Sangheili plasma rifle... or the Chief's SPARTAN laser. After that little slugging match, the Sentinels had dropped as easily as flies, the Enforcers shielding failed to match up to the Warthog's unorthodox twin machine guns, the Super Enforcer had succumbed to another blast from the laser, and the single Strato Sentinel to try its luck had essentially destroyed itself by ramming and bringing a building down on top of itself.

...Douglas using his rocket launcher to blind the thing may have had something to do with the last one. May have...

And now, after a prolonged period of time where not much seemed to happen (which Serina attributed to the opposition just not knowing what to try next), they'd been caught in this alley by another Blade and its varied friends. They couldn't go forward because that little mob was waiting to fry them the moment they stuck a finger out of the alley, and the rear led to an irrigation ditch now flooded with what looked suspiciously like starship coolant. Neither direction did a very good job of suggesting survival... so it was time to get a little more creative.

While the Chief, Alice and Patab guarded the Hog and kept the machines looking in the right direction, the other two SPARTANs had grabbed heavy weapons - including the Stanchion - and crept into the nearest building. With any luck they'd find their way behind the Forerunner machines and help catch them in a crossfire.

At least, that was the plan... but we all know the saying "no plan survives contact with the enemy".

"...Sierra 092 to Sierra 117," Jerome's voice whispered across the comm., "we are in position. Are you ready?"

The Chief made a clicking sound to acknowledge, then wordlessly nodded to Alice. She signalled back, plucked Patab's plasma rifle from his claws (eliciting a slight grumble, but the Unggoy at least understood why she'd taken it), and silently crept back to the entrance of the alley. Readyng the SPARTAN laser, the Chief moved to join her.

"Sierra 092 and Sierra 042; engaging in five."

The Chief silently counted off the seconds, synchronously gesturing three, two, one to Alice. Zero rolled round, and right on schedule, the crack and much louder sonic boom of a Stanchion gauss rifle being fired echoed around the neighbourhood. Out of the corner of his eye, the Chief registered the round flashing into a building and boring straight through it, tailed by a slightly slower moving collection of Sentinel parts. A wayward rocket veered past, causing nary a flinch. It was all part of the plan â€" the SPARTANs knew

there was no point firing rockets _or_ the Stanchion at the Blade... unless they wanted to be on the receiving end of the attacks as well. So the other two SPARTANs were there _just_ to get the thing's attention_. When it had turned to face them, conveniently putting its back to the alleyway, Alice and the Chief would pop out to pot it in the rear with their energy weapons.

...Of course, the Sentinels were fair game to anyone.

The weapon fire seemed to tail off slightly.

"Blast! Sierra 117 and Sierra 130, do _not_ engage, repeat, do _not_ engage! The Sentinels are gone, but the Blade isn't taking the bait!"

Another unseen rocket launched; from the noise seemingly hitting a building... to drop a ton of masonry onto the uncooperative machine... said lump of masonry promptly tumbled its way into the Chief's view, deflected just like the normal attacks.

"Still not responding. We need another plan!"

"Relax soldiers!" Serina interrupted. "Our friends are on it."

"Friends?" The Chief suddenly had the inexplicable impulse to look up. As he did, he spotted pair of Constructors dart over his head, pop round the corner and disappear in the direction of the Blade.

"...Serina..." He _knew_ what those Constructors were. Each one had borne a dash of blue paint on the underside, a way the humans had devised for identifying which Forerunner drones were friendly - friendly, because they held a little fragment of Cortana. The captain had said he couldn't afford to send any C. Sentinels with the Chief... he hadn't said anything about the two C. _Constructors_, as Serina had thoughtfully pointed out to him earlier.

"You remember what I said about the C. Sentinels?" Serina asked, sounding just so slightly _smug_. "How the Cortana derived behaviour programs they carry acts in a manner similar to a virus?"

"...Yes...?" he slowly responded, seeing where this was going.

"Well, I'd say we're about to pick up a new addition to the flock."

"Sierra 117, are those Constructors we can see ours?" Jerome's vaguely alarmed voice sounded, "Because they seem to be fiddling with the target's circuitry... oh frak, the thing's moving! It's heading straight for you!"

"_Relax_, Sierra 092, they're ours. _All_ of them. Master Chief, why don't you step out to meet your new friend?"

Slightly uneasy about doing so, the Chief complied. The sight of the Forerunner super-drone bearing down on him was distinctly unnerving... yet one thing was immediately apparent. It didn't open fire. And as the Blade came to a halt in front of him, tried to

nuzzle up to him as a dog would, he could see both eyes morse coding _John... John... John_.

"Well there's a sight you don't see every day," Alice remarked, emerging from the alley behind. "Why couldn't we do that to the rest of them?"

"Because we didn't know it would work." Serina answered. "It was a last resort sort of thing."

The Chief resisted the urge to push the Blade away from him, deciding that having the machine on their side was worth the pressure. From further down the street, the two armoured figures of Jerome and Douglas moved up, appearing bemused even with their faces completely obscured by featureless visors.

"Nice..." the former said suddenly. "Any other little tricks you've got stored up? MJOLNIR active camouflage maybe?"

...

"Now that you happen to mention it..."

The Constructors took off, rising high before veering into a nearby building by means of a handy little vent. Probably purpose built for Constructors given its unusual shape.

"...Where have you sent them now..?"

"You'll see. And while we wait for them to come back, we might as well get moving a bit... and someone pick up a couple of those Sentinel Beams I see lying over there. Remember what Solis said about this new Blade model?"

...Come to think of it... _yes_. The Chief mentally admonished himself for forgetting, but to be fair, that meeting had sort of been hijacked by certain revelations. Revelations regarding Mercurial Wisdom's true nature, and the little matter of Archon's new moon. It wasn't surprising they'd let that little detail regarding Blades and Sentinel Beams slip their collective minds.

...But it was hardly the time to think about that now. The _Flame of Conviction_ wasn't too far now, and the longer they took, the less likely there would be someone to save. So, with a pair of charred but serviceable Sentinel beams now in their possession, they returned to the Hog, removed it from the alley, and drove onwards, Blade following in their wake.

...Half a minute later, and they found a rank of Sentinels blocking the street.

...All of which refused to fire. In fact, they refused to even turn to face the Hog, which got the Chief immediately wondering whether the C. Virus was starting to spread independently of its hosts.

"Douglas, with me. The rest of you, stay here and cover us." he ordered the other SPARTANS, hopping out and carefully approaching the Sentinels. They _still_ didn't react. Twenty metres away; not a twitch. Ten metres, nada. _Five_ metres... action!

...In that one of the machines drifted slightly to the right so it could see past Douglas, eye staring past the SPARTAN and down the street. Clearly, it was watching for something, but wasn't bothered one bit about the human super soldiers standing right in front of it. Neither were the rest. In fact, they steadfastly ignored them. And this, combined with the fact that none of them were blinking John at him, told him that this wasn't the C. Virus at work.

He eyed the street behind them. If they were watching for something...

"Everyone, keep an eye on those motion trackers. Any anomalies, report them immediately."

A series of acknowledgement lights blinked in his HUD... but the sudden tension was completely ruined by Serina snorting.

"Oh, don't be so melodramatic. They aren't watching for Solar Wind or anything, they're watching for us!"

The Chief's peripheral vision noted the C. Constructors returning to head height beside him; back from whatever task Serina had sent them on... hang on a moment.

Serina beat his mouth to it. Still as "clairvoyant" as ever. "That's right, primitive, (he noted there was no venom in the word this time) our friends have just rewritten the security protocols around here. It won't last, but I suspect for now the Sentinels think you SPARTANS look like ancient Greek warriors or something. Either that or they've just been programmed to ignore you.

"Now are we done here? Or would you like to bask in my genius a little longer?"

"...We're done."

###

...The following journey was one of the most unnerving the Chief had ever experienced. Their Hog trundled along, invisible to the machines that should have been hunting them down. Instead, they drifted from the Hog's path with nary a sound, and the Sangheili crash site grew visibly closer by the minute. To attempt to relate the rest of the journey would be an exercise in futility, and in boredom as well.

But there was one last occurrence worth mentioning. It occurred as the Hog was making its way down a wide aisle, the Conviction mere minutes away at the rate the Chief was setting.

"John! UNSC fighters!"

Jerome's shout was hardly necessary, not when one of the crumpled fighters was crashed right in middle of the street. It was almost a surprise to see it there â€" they'd seen plenty of downed Covenant strike craft during their journey, but this was the first human case. Beyond the first, another fighter's wreckage could be seen, tail end jutting from a smashed first story window further down. And that was it.

He pulled to a halt. Experienced eyes sweeping across the scene, it was pretty clear to him how the nearer craft had been brought down. He doubted the tangled Enforcer pierced from front to rear by the fighter's energy scorched nose was there for decoration.

"Wonder what sort of fighter it was?" Douglas speculated out loud as the Chief started the Hog moving again. There wasn't any point hanging around - the cockpit's only occupant was clearly dead, neck broken and twisted in an unnatural way. The Chief silently thanked his lucky stars that the pilot's helmet obstructed his face.

"I think... it's a Sabre."

For once, Serina didn't sound too sure of herself, and Alice was quick to pick up on it.

"You _think?_"

Serina sighed. "ONI project. At least, it was an ONI blueprint that someone passed by me. I'd say the design changed a bit between that and the finished prod- _Stop_"

The wheels screeched to a halt, the Chief not even bothering to ask why. But the thought _did_ emerge to circulate his brain when he looked round and noticed no enemies.

"To the right, ignoramus!"

...It was only when he'd twisted in his seat and spotted the weakly blinking light atop a small pod like object, that he realised Serina was back to insulting him. There wasn't any point complaining, so he settled for analysing their new find... human made, UNSC, slightly larger than a human... and transmitting a faint localised signal on the UNSC E-band.

"It's an escape capsule," he concluded. "The Sabre's?"

"Obviously."

Without a word, Douglas swapped out his rocket launcher for a shotgun, and hopped off. Somewhat hastily, he approached the pod, placed his hand on the capsule's flickering control display... and the cover sprang open. Its interior was simple to say the least - enough room for a pilot chair, and the pilot herself. She wasn't moving.

"...I'm glad I'm not in her shoes. IFF tag reads Iras Simmons, radar intercept officer for Templar 1. She's alive, but unconscious... I think her oxygen supply's nearly run out.

"...Bio monitor attached to her flight suit indicates she's got concussion, a pair of broken ribs, and oxygen deprivation. She's in a state of shock..."

"Can she be saved?" the Chief asked matter of factly. The answer wouldn't make any difference to them in regards to what they'd do next, but he'd prefer knowing now whether the downed Sabre officer was fated for the infirmary or the mortuary. Turning around to find a

fresh corpse where previously there had been a living, breathing human being was not how he liked things to go.

"I don't see why not. We'll need to get aid for her fairly snappish-"

"Well get her on board then!" Alice snapped, sounding cranky. She'd always been the emotional one. "She'll get aid when we get where we're going, and the longer you boys stand around talking about it, the less likely her chances."

...Douglas promptly (and rather gently) scooped the pilot up and made his return. He wasn't arguing with that logic.

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Balance - Exterior of Flame of Conviction (Archon Occupation, Day 6, Late Evening (Sector 16 time))

That was the last distraction. They'd secured Iras in the back of the Hog, made a space for her amongst the assorted weaponry and... tied her down. In any other situation that sort of behaviour would have been suspicious at best, and downright shocking at worst, but not here. The Blade still following in their wake, they'd made a beeline for the Conviction. Some twenty minutes of tearing round the edge of the crash site later, looking for a way in, and the SPARTANs had hit pay dirt. They'd found an entrance, they'd dismounted to check it out, they knew it was functional... just one teensy problem to take care of first.

"...So, did anyone actually think up a way of getting in there?" Serina asked on an open channel.

"What? I thought thinking was your job!" Alice quipped in response, taking a step backwards and nearly kicking Patab by mistake. Collectively, the group took a long hard look at the portal in front of them. It didn't look all that secure, but that would be what the hazy purple forcefield was for.

"...Can opener?" Douglas suggested, hand resting suggestively on his rocket launcher. Serina snorted.

"Yeah sure, blow your way in. The Sangheili won't mind. They won't take it as a sign of hostiles. They certainly won't send out their best warriors to bounce plasma grenades ro- I'm being
sarcastic!"

Douglas promptly removed his finger from the trigger.

"Maybe we could hack the controls?" suggested Jerome, the Chief nodding at the simple idea. Serina however, had other opinions.

"Got a terminal for me to hack? No? Then you can forget getting me to do the work. Any reasonable suggestions?"

Silence for a moment. Until...

"We knock?"

Silence... until Alice broke down in a fit of laughter. Serina, just

sighed with exasperation.

"...Someone tell that Unggoy just what reasonable means. Because something tells me there's a slight gap in his knowledge..."

THUD THUD THUD.

Two SPARTANs and one Unggoy looked round, to see Alice with gauntlet raised. Knocking on the forcefield would have been... tricky, so she'd gone and pounded on a bit of metal next to it. You could just sense Serina's exasperation.

"What? It was worth a try!"

The Chief sensed Serina bristle, begin to chew the other SPARTAN outâ€| except then the Chief, and by extension the onboard AI (seeing as she technically used the same MJOLNIR enhanced senses as he did) heard something.

Patab yelped as the SPARTANs fluidly moved into firing positions, aiming for the door. There was definitely something moving around behind there; distinctly heavy footsteps and a low, alien grumbling. The Chief gave a nod; Jerome and Alice moved back a little, reached into the Hog and yanked out Stanchion and HMG respectively. Sure, those were supposed to be allies in there, but it never hurt to be careful. And seeing as the Master Chief was the only one who had known the Sangheili as alliesâ€|

â€|.With a screech of metal, the portal jerkedâ€| a few centimetres. A pair of Sangheili hoofs were revealed through the gap, one of which raised to kick the door, with an appropriately curse like exclamation emanating from the attached, yet unseen mouth. The door resumed rising.

...To reveal, in somewhat grimy looking golden armour, a Sangheili Zealot. And... yeek, six Mgalekgolo flanking him. The individual Lekgolo worms making up the form of each Hunter looked a little charred, but their armour cladding was as shiny as the day it had been forged. The forcefield separating the SPARTANs from the Covenant Separatists fizzled out, just as another fizzled into existence behind the Hog. Stale, scorched air washed over them, the atmosphere from within the ship having seen far better days than this. While Patab began dry retching and the unconscious Iras coughed despite her stupor, the Chief was just grateful that his armour kept the worst of it from reaching his lungs. Patab's methane re-breather meanwhile, would seem to have a few unwelcome leaks...

Six Hunters. That was a lot of worm powered battle armour, and the Zealot wasn't likely to be a pushover either, twin Needlers clasped ready and a deactivated energy sword riding on his hip. Human locked eyes with... Mgalekgolo "head", Sangheili with ineffectually hiding Grunt. You could cut the tension with a blunt knife...

...Until the Zealot's jaws cracked open in what everyone hoped was a smile, and not just a snarl.

"Arbiter be praised, it is the Demon!"

Yes, that would be a smile. As one, as efficient as a well oiled machine, the SPARTANs made safe their weapons. Tension dissipated,

yet even the Sangheili, master of reading a warrior's stance as he undoubtedly was, would have struggled to see any change in the way the humans stood. Mindful of the Mgalekgolo stalwartly watching his every move, the Chief began his advance. All seemed well enough, except for the little fact of...

Serina put it across quite nicely;

...

"...Were they expecting us?"

###

****Unit Profile: Blade mk. III****

Overview: The third generation Forerunner Blade, a defence drone unique to Archon. Whereas the mk. I was merely a structural proof of concept and the mk. II - while exceptionally dangerous to the unprepared - was nothing revolutionary, the mk. III is the first to mount a new class of super-shielding. This shielding renders the Blade a near insurmountable challenge to UNSC forces.

Physical Description: The Blade mk. III is indistinguishable from the mk. II, beyond the shimmering silver shield.

Armaments and Defences: The Blade mk. III mounts the same weaponry as the previous model. However, the mk. II's standard overcharged shields have been replaced by a new system - Repulse shields.

Repulse shields stop any and all projectiles entering their field of effect by capturing the target's kinetic energy. The same energy is then used to provide the projectile with the same momentum in the opposite direction - launching it back the way it came. In essence it bears similarities to the grenade reversal abilities of Promethean Watcher drones - but was developed independantly and is more sophisticated.

Disadvantages to repulse shields exist; a much higher power requirement than the Promethean grenade reversal, and is also prone to burning out if used for extended periods of time. Alternatively, it is possible to overload the shield using excessive force from multiple directions simultaneously - potentially with a high casualty rate, or bypass it by setting rockets or missiles to proximity detonation. Finally, the shield has no effect on plasma or laser based weaponry. Clearly, while dangerous to those unused to dealing with it, the Blade mk. III is still relatively simple to defeat using the correct tactics.

****Unit Profile: Scimitar****

Overview: A second class of advanced defence drone developed on Mercurial Wisdom's instructions. Unlike the Blade, this model was created on Balance. It is a counterpart to the Blade, emphasising speed over durability and rapid fire accuracy over pure firepower. This unit is capable of matching fighter type ships in pure speed, but is not capable of matching them in straight up fights.

Physical Description: Spheroid towards the rear where the primary

thrusters are housed, the body rapidly narrows toward the middle, then slowly narrows towards the needle sharp fore. The "eye" common to all non-Promethean Forerunner drones can be found in a blister on the top. Weapon systems are found in ball mountings along either side, halfway along its length. Small hover type thrusters are found running the length of the base.

Dimensions:

Length: 2 metres

Width (at widest point): 0.5 metres

Height (at tallest point): 0.6 metres.

Armaments and Defences: Six micro Sentinel Beam emitters, three to a side. These are tightly focussed and thus, while the resultant beams are much narrower, are only slightly weaker than a standard Sentinel beam. In addition, they fire roughly two pulses a second.

The Scimitar is the only combat Sentinel derivative that does not carry shielding. As such, it will succumb to small amounts of fire, providing you can hit it. Its armour is likewise minimal to keep weight down and agility up.

###

-Next Phase: Breakout!

End
file.